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Tools under the sink

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Tools under the sink

by

Michael Edward McNally

**A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Iowa State University**

**This is to certify that the Master's thesis of
Michael Edward McNally
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University**

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

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STILL LIFE

The day after the American boy drowned, John Keefe fished a camera from the river. The silver his old eyes had seen glinting in the shallows was the clasp of a strap; John hooked it with a stick from the bank and raised the dripping device above the water. Behind him, Grace crossed herself.

"Oh John, it must've been the tourist-boy's, sure. Put it back."

"Back?" John said over his shoulder, "You're mad, old woman. T'is Japanese, I'd have forty quid for it."

"John," Grace said firmly, "It's the dead boy's. Put it back."

John looked at the camera hanging over the flowing water. The dead boy's sure, but it looked undamaged, and weren't these new models the tourists carried water-proof? And didn't they focus themselves with bells and whistles and whirling mechanisms? The roll of film in the camera was probably still preserved: The dead boy's final testament could be recorded within, waiting for someone to raise the last images his eyes had ever seen, leaning out over the old bridge. What if his hands had triggered a final snapshot as he fell to the water? Once below? Was there one last still life before life was gone?

"John," Grace repeated, "Back."

There was no chance Grace would allow him to take the camera home, so John lowered it back beneath the surface of the stream and walked on with his wife, marking the spot with his eyes.

When he returned alone an hour later, the camera was gone.

UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

Grover Cleveland hates my guts.

He's clever about it, though, playing his cards close to the vest and generally displaying a wilderness cunning that has survived generations of domestication and translated fully intact to his Mommy's living room. The first time she leaves the two of us alone I look over at him seated across the coffee table, his white moustache and goatee neatly trimmed, and for some reason I feel unkempt. Maybe under-dressed. Though Grover Cleveland has been politic if not friendly thus far, his brown eyes are less than warm as he regards me in the lengthening silence.

"So, Gee-Cee," I say, making an effort to reach out, "how's life treating you?"

He blinks. Stares. Then gives a little noise like a throaty cough, sort of an, "Eh-oooh." He looks at me for a another second, then turns away with clear disdain.

I'm bugged, maybe actually irked, but before I can respond Grover's Mommy comes back into the room and I snap my mouth shut, cutting off anything sharp.

The next Monday at work, Tony Dilmont raps on our mutual cubical wall shortly after nine. His face and fingers appear over the top, hovering above me like a Kilroy-Was-Here drawing.

"So Mitch," he says eagerly, "how'd it go?" Tony has been married for two years and is convinced that everybody in the office but him is regularly engaging in wild sexual escapades with an exotic variety of partners. At least he seems to hope that somebody is.

I can only shrug, "Good, or not bad at least. We got along okay, but I think her dog hates me."

"Her say what?" Tony asks. His head moves from side to side and there's a metallic

squeal from within his cubical. Tony is standing on his chair, and it's trying to twist out from under him.

"Her dog. She's got this little terrier thing named Grover Cleveland."

"What?"

"Dilmont!" Our supervisor's voice booms out from the far side of the office.

"Look, I'll talk to you at lunch," Tony says before he disappears and the sound of industrious key-strokes erupts from his side of the wall. Before I go back to my own keyboard I have time to think: What is this? Junior high school?

We set a second date for the next weekend, but after careful consideration I find that I don't want to wait that long. I call her on Wednesday, trying not to sound over-anxious, but feeling it slightly.

"Well, sure," she says, I think trying not to sound over-anxious.

Jeeze, we are in junior high.

I suggest a drink after work. The office full of cubicles I work in is on the fourteenth floor of a building two blocks away from a virtually identical building which houses her office full of cubicles on the tenth floor. There is a coffee shop halfway between, where we met in the first place, and it seems to me it would be a simple matter to meet there after work.

"Oh, well, not *right* after," she says, "I have to get home and feed Grover."

She lives about twenty miles outside of town in West Seneca. With the rush hour traffic that would be better than an hour round trip. We both try to come up with another idea, but finally forget it and agree to wait for the weekend.

I do believe I'm really starting to dislike the dog.

Despite scheduling conflicts arising from the terrier's dietary needs, his Mommy and I still manage to see each other with regularity over the next month. It goes well, maybe even

remarkably well, with the exception of the time that I spend out at her place, where Grover Cleveland still holds office.

He is still not openly hostile though - if he was barking at me or peeing on my car tires, that would be one thing. Instead, when we come into the house and his Mommy calls, "Grover! Mommy's home!" he comes bounding out of the back, short claws clicking on the tile in the entryway, and nuzzles his Mommy's hand fondly while she kneels and scratches his ears. Me, he doesn't even acknowledge, and for the rest of the evening or weekend day, he won't so much as look in my direction. Oh I try to get his attention mind you: "Hey Grov, here pup!" Nothing. He just keeps looking up at his Mommy and doing a little prance around her, and she turns to me and shrugs. "Funny," she tells me. "He's usually more social."

But when we are briefly alone (Grover and I - he won't leave his Mommy unchaperoned in my company), then he'll turn to me. Stare. And even though he's the dog and I'm the upright biped with the opposable thumbs, that look is so unbelievably condescending I can't think of a word to say. Sometimes I manage to get my mouth open, but that's as far as it goes. *I'm wondering if I should risk trying for a pet, a friendly scratch maybe,* and he just stares and makes it clear that he's barely tolerating my presence, my *existence*. After the first couple weeks of this, I can hear his voice in my mind's ear, coarse words in a tone I can only describe as Presidential: *You gonna try and touch me, monkey-boy? I double-doggy dare you.*

I don't. A second before his Mommy reenters the room, or the yard, or wherever we are, Grover turns away and she walks in to find him pointedly ignoring me and me sitting there looking at him with my mouth open. For the rest of the evening I'm a flustered mess.

I'm pretty sure she thinks I'm at least mildly retarded.

Fortunately, we don't get together solely out at her place. Her neighborhood out in West Seneca is nice, but the town itself is a typical suburb; strip malls and fast food joints, so

when we go out at night it is usually in Buffalo. But even though the dog is twenty-odd miles away, he's a presence.

A weekend in mid October for instance, we meet on Saturday night at MacGuff's, a lakeside restaurant with much better food than the name might suggest. We wait in the bar for a table, which is fine because MacGuff's also has the best Irish Coffee in town. Sometimes that is about the only thing that makes the Buffalo winter bearable.

We order a couple and sit at the bar. There are about three minutes of small talk originating totally on my side; she seems distracted somehow, thinking about something else. I'm suddenly convinced she's about to dump me, and my feet start tapping nervously against the brass piping along the bottom of the bar.

"Have you ever had a dog, Mitch?" she asks out of the blue. This probably has nothing to do with whatever I just finished saying, but I'm not sure because I haven't really been *listening to me* either.

"Uh, no," I say. "I had some fish for a while in college, but my roommate sort of killed them with a glass of Vodka." Christ, I'm babbling. *She's going to dump me and who can blame her?*

Instead she flicks her eyes and gives me a look like she's not sure she heard me right. "Vodka?"

I nod. "Yeah. He said he was trying to do an experiment for a drugs-and-behavior class, or something. Apparently tropical fish have a low tolerance for Russian alcohol."

She laughs and I take a too-large swallow of Irish Coffee, almost burning the roof of my mouth. Maybe she's not going to dump me. Maybe I still have her fooled - she may not yet realize that I'm an imbecile.

"Why do you ask?" I manage, "Something up with Grover?"

She nods and sips at her coffee. She puts an elbow on the bar and bends the arm, tapping the red nail of her index finger against the small earring in her right ear, tilting her head

slightly to do so. It is a little absent gesture I've noticed before, and found myself thinking about when I should be doing something else, like working.

"My neighbor wants me to get Grover fixed," she says.

I blink and wonder for a second exactly what part of a terrier can break and require repair. Then it dawns on me what she means and I unconsciously tense up and make a small involuntary sound of sympathetic dismay. She smiles, a little embarrassed.

"Probably not a suitable topic for a dinner conversation, huh?" she asks.

"Oh man, ouch!" I say and shake my head. "Why does your neighbor care about Grover Cleveland's...um..." I search for a neutral phrase but the only term in my idiot head is, "Executive Branch."

"Because he has a Welsh Corgi, named Molly, I think. Anyhow, Grover's taken quite the shine to her." She sighs. "He's constantly trying to dig under the fence, and terrier's can dig, let me tell you. When I make him stop he just sits there looking towards Molly's yard and making this really awful whimpering."

"I'm familiar with that sound," I say. "I think I was making it most of the way through high school."

She laughs at that, relieving me immensely, and I start laughing too. The bartender looks at us a bit oddly when he comes over to tell us our table's ready. We go on to dinner and other subjects, but even as I'm going home alone after another cup of coffee afterwards, and after a kiss in the parking lot I'm sure was *that close* to turning into something more, I keep thinking about Grover looking mournfully out a window at night, over to the house next door.

It still wouldn't break my heart if he got hit by a bus, but there's something else now. When it turns out the next week that Molly and her owners are moving away, and Grover will be spared the knife, I'm surprised to find myself feeling sort of relieved for him. The next time I am out at their place and momentarily alone with the dog in the living room, I reach out a hand to scratch his muzzle. He gives such a sudden, violent growl that I get spittle on my

hand, and I'm still wiping it off on a pant leg when Grover's Mommy comes back in.

"So that's Grover Cleveland, huh?" Tony asks.

I nod, and we both stand there in the entry way of my cubical. There's a new object on the desk, beside the Halloween card from Mom. It's a slim picture frame, the inexpensive cardboard kind that props up against its own fold-out back. The photo is of Grover Cleveland's Mommy standing against the post of a worn grey fence on what I assume is her folks' farm in Ohio. She has on jeans and a bulky sweater and is looking off slightly to the left with one foot on a crosspiece of fence, one hand palm up against a hip, smiling unselfconsciously off towards what must, judging from the orangish lighting, be a sunset. The pose is too good to be anything but unintentional.

Grover saw it coming, though. The dog is standing in front of her sideways, flank against her leg, head turned to the camera. He looks like an encyclopedia illustration for a Wirehaired Fox Terrier, forelimbs ramrod straight, hind legs with a slight belligerent spread, thick short tail standing at attention and looking vaguely phallic. The brown and grayish swaths of color along his loins and withers look somehow like pieces of an art deco mobile hanging in front of the otherwise white dog. The shadows of the setting sun that make his Mommy's narrowed eyes look bottomless fall away from the side of Grover's muzzle, concealing his right eye entirely and making the left stand out as a bright chip of yellow light. Though Grover Cleveland's shoulder barely comes up to his Mommy's knee, he looks prepared to stop a rhino charging at her.

"She's really cute," Tony says.

"It's a he," I say.

When I was a kid I always wanted a dog, a big furry thing like a Newfoundland or a Wolfhound that I would ride around the neighborhood like a pony and name "Chewbacca."

That idea didn't fly in the Varney household though, apparently we just weren't "Pet People." I never got a good reason why we couldn't get a dog, much less the dog itself.

Instead I would play over at the houses of friends who had dogs, hanging out more with the canines than with their masters. The dogs loved me, probably just for the attention I'd shower on them, and for a while I even planned to pursue a career as a dog catcher. Then my smart-mouthed older brother had to go and tell me in graphic detail exactly what happened to stray dogs picked up on the street.

My brother ruined the whole Santa Claus thing for me, too, but I think I felt worse about the strays.

Things escalate in early November. Though I get too discombobulated to try petting anything over at Grover's place, his Mommy and I have done a certain amount of nuzzling at mine. When "The Night" finally comes, though, it is not my apartment we wind up at after dinner.

She doesn't call out to Grover when we enter the house. We've been engaged in a sort of heated-running-kiss since getting out of the car, but after a couple seconds of trying to fumble our coats off we're distracted by a rough snort from the floor. Grover Cleveland sits there with his head cocked sideways, looking disappointed up at his Mommy.

Young lady, what are you doing with your mouth on monkey-boy?

"Hi Grover," she says absently, then turns back to me. "Put him in the kitchen, would you?" she says, then heads for the stairs, pulling her shoes off on the way.

For the first time ever, I grin widely at Grover.

"C'mon doggy," I say as I walk past him and hold open the kitchen door.

Grover keeps looking up the stairs for a moment. Then he gets slowly off his haunches and strolls in my direction, like he just happens to be heading in that direction anyway. He passes me without a glance, but in the kitchen he turns around and gives me his old baleful

glare.

I've had a few glasses of wine, and in any event no blood is making it as far up as my brain right at present. I lean down to just inches from Grover's face, getting a little whiff of Milk-Bone, and quietly sneer, "Well, Mr. President, I'm gonna go upstairs now, and do the deed with your Mommy."

He bites me in the face.

"I'd kill the bastard," Tony tells me the next day. We're sitting in a bar after work, beers between us, and I'm trying not to scratch at the bandage covering the eight stitches in my chin. I consider his statement seriously before responding

"I don't think that killing her dog is going to endear me to her."

"No, you don't just rush in and brain him with a shovel right in front of her," Tony says, "What you need is an assassination plot. Are there any grassy knolls near her house? Does Grover Cleveland ever go to the theater?"

Tony is clearly as amused as hell by all this, and I didn't even give him the full blow-by-blow of the Emergency Room visit. Grover's Mommy drove me there, apologizing profusely the whole way, while I was busy bleeding all over her car and trying not to scream "Oh god it hurts!" When we got there, the doctor (who looked to be about fourteen) narrowed his eyes at my face and said, "What'd you do to make him bite you?" I could only blink at the floor and mumble.

"I am not going to kill Grover Cleveland," I tell Tony firmly, closing the subject. He shrugs.

"Well, you're going to have to do something. Look, dogs are descended from wolves, buddy, and they'll defend their territory to the death. Now that blood has been drawn...hell, you better not go back over there ever again."

That is a real possibility. I could probably explain to Grover Cleveland's Mommy that I

can't go back to her place now, and we could meet exclusively in town at my apartment. I could do that, I'd just have to face the fact that this dog doesn't like me and never will, and that whatever canine comradery I had with dogs in my youth died with Santa Claus.

I could, but I won't. I can't believe that the two of us are ever going to get anywhere if I can't even get her dog to accept me into his furry little life, and so I vow then and there that Grover Cleveland is going to love me.

Grover Cleveland sniffs at the squeeze-toy on his Mommy's kitchen floor. It's shaped like a pork-chop, and if he'd bite it, it would emit a squeak. He doesn't though, he just pushes it around with his nose, then looks up at me.

What's this, monkey-boy? You trying to bribe a public official?

"Go on, Grover," his Mommy says. She's standing at my side, back half a step to allow Grover and me our little act of reconciliation, but close enough to grab his collar if he springs for my jugular.

Still eyeing me carefully, Grover dips his head and lightly jaws the pork-chop. It squeaks, and seemingly against his will Grover's tail gives a slight wag.

Okay, the squeak's cute, I like that. But don't get too cocky, monkey-boy. I've still got my eye on you.

By the end of the month more progress has been made. The stitches are out and I've spent a small fortune in rubber bones, tennis balls, and doggy-biscuits that I've taken to filling my pockets with whenever I drive out to Grover's. A few days before his Mommy and I go our separate ways back to family for Thanksgiving, we do our own meal thing at her place. Grover commandeers the floor under the table near me and I slip him small pieces of turkey and stuffing at every opportunity.

Grover Cleveland has deigned to play fetch with me on occasion, and after the meal we

go out in the snowy back yard. Grover springs and bounds through drifts, bringing back the tennis ball with admirable speed and placing it in my hand every time. After a while, he drops it at my feet, and licks my hand instead.

It's an important moment for us, and I turn to the window to show his Mommy what he's doing, but to my surprise she's not watching us.

I show Tony the basket, pointing out to him that it's slightly oval shaped. Sort of a Presidential Oval Office thing.

"Cute," Tony says.

I show him the presidential blue blankets, explain to him that Grover's Mommy just had him sleeping on an old towel in the kitchen.

"It's obvious you put a lot of thought into this, Mitch," Tony says, "So, just curious. What are you giving *her* for Christmas?"

I ask him for ideas.

Two weeks into the new year, the company Grover's Mommy works for sends her to New York for five days.

I assure her it's no problem, my building allows pets. We put Grover's new basket on the front seat of my car and he sits in it and looks bright-eyed out the windows as I drive him into town. On entering my apartment he patrols every room, sniffing the whole place at length before finding it to his satisfaction. I follow his feeding regimen to the letter, maybe with a few extra treats now and then, walk him every morning and evening, hold the grip of the red rubber pull toy I bought him every night. Friday, the day before his Mommy gets home, I take the day off and we lie on the floor in front of the TV, snacking on Fritos and Milk Bones. I laugh when he barks at the German Shepherds on Cops. "Good dog," I tell him, and he wags his tail and looks over his shoulder back at me.

You're actually okay yourself, monkey-boy.

Later that night, his Mommy calls from New York.

"Transferred?" I ask, "What do you mean transferred?"

Saturday morning. We have picked up Grover's Mommy at the airport and she is seated passenger side in my car, fidgeting in a bulky winter coat. Grover is standing on her garment bag in the back seat with his head sticking up front between us.

"The company's cutting the Buffalo office back by seventy-percent," Grover's Mommy says, "I'm one of the few lucky ones that's getting moved to the main office, but I've got to go now." She turns towards me, but the interstate is full of cars headed into the city and I can't do much more than glance occasionally her way. Grover pants a big grin and swivels his head from one of us to the other. His Mommy gives him a scratch on top of the head.

"This is what I've been waiting for, Mitch," she says. "The chance I've been working for."

I should be something here. Happy or supportive or...something. Instead, all I manage is a half-hearted, "You've got a place in New York already?"

"The company's putting me up until I can find something," she says. "They've got a couple of apartments for visiting reps and what-not."

"And these places allow pets?" is what I say. Is actually what I say.

I've got my eye on a T-bird right in front of us that is trying to switch lanes, so I'm not looking at her, but the icy silence that greets that particular remark is tangible enough to make the hair on the back of my neck stand up.

Nobody says a word for the next four miles. I leave I-90 at the West Seneca exit, and idle for several seconds at the base of the off-ramp, staring at the stop sign, waiting for it to change.

At her house, I carry Grover's basket to the entry way while she hauls in her luggage. Grover is bounding through drifts in the front yard, nose pressed to the snow, looking for himself.

We put our burdens down inside and then both stand shifting uneasily on the front stoop. "Look," she finally says, "this really wasn't going anywhere anyway."

"I thought it was," I say. What else am I going to say?

She looks at the terrier, who is re-marking the mail box at the end of the driveway. She calls his name and he comes bounding back up her unshoveled drive and starts his customary prance around her legs. She scratches his chin and shoos him inside, then turns back to me and it strikes me all of a sudden that her warm eyes are not brown after all.

"He's just my dog," she says. Grover scrabbles across the entry way and disappears into the kitchen. "You know that, don't you Mitch? Just my *dog*?"

That last is said in a tone that is almost angry, but she shakes her head and brings a hand to her forehead more like she's tired, or maybe even sad.

"Goodbye Mitch," she says and steps inside, pushing the door shut behind her. Just before it closes, I get a glimpse of Grover emerging from the kitchen, clicking back into the foyer with a tennis ball in his mouth.

I know it would be bad form to stand in front of her door for an hour, likewise to go sit immobile in my car in her driveway. So I drive away, a couple of blocks, then pull over and put the car in park.

I don't feel much like going home and just watching some TV for the rest of the weekend, then going back to work Monday and lightly bantering back and forth with Tony about how All Good Things...yadda yadda yadda. I feel like turning the car around, driving up on her lawn, and shouting at her house that I was doing it for her all along. But I don't. Because, after all, I wasn't, was I? I drive back to the interstate and head back towards the city, but make one stop before going home.

"Here we go," the store owner cups a hand under the biggest puppy and lifts it carefully out of the cage. He holds it up in front of me. "Here's a frisky little fellow. Whaddya think?"

It's a Pekingese puppy, with a mane of grey hair and a flat little face with bright eyes. He looks at me curiously, pink crescent of tongue flickering back in his jowls.

"I think he looks a little like William Howard Taft," I say, and the store owner raises an eyebrow. But William wags his tail.

Now was that so much to ask?

CASUALTIES

She wakes and blinks at the room around her. Scraggly brown carpet, TV bolted to a bureau, sunlight coming in specks through shabby curtains. Motel room. Before she rises, she spends a few moments trying to sort out where and who she is this morning

Fredericksburg, Virginia. An autopark Holiday Inn, which means no one carried the bags to the room for them. They themselves brought in what they needed from the car right outside, which at eleven o'clock last night consisted only of the beer. She is Sally MacLennane, named after a bar in a drinking song, though she has been only Little Mac as long as she can remember.

Little Mac swings her legs from the side of the empty bed and places her bare feet on the thin carpet - like worn felt on an old slate pool table. Her hands grip the side of the mattress and she looks out from the hair hanging in her face towards the sink under a mirrored wall. It is open to the room and separate from the square tile closet containing the toilet and shower, where she and Matthieu made love late last night, if you choose to call it that, and she does.

She turned upright too fast and her insides seem to settle slowly, and not quite in the right way. Vital organs feel like they're sliding off stone ledges, plopping down to land in tired heaps. Tracts and systems only loosely connected and redundant besides; like one of those joke-machines you see on TV - something that takes a thousand levers and pulleys and twelve minutes to butter a piece of bread. She is hungover, *Like that Tower in Pisa, hungover*, Big Mac would have said in his New York growl - the father now dead seven years. Lucky Seven.

Little Mac rises slowly and makes for the sink with wobbly steps. The brain isn't fully awake yet (*The mind may die, but the body lives on*), and she has no intention of

staying stationary long enough for the thick rubber mallets to begin hammering in the noggin again.

Most of the case is under the counter, empty blue cans in the plastic trash bucket, a few near misses on the floor. In the sunken sink itself are the last three cans, bobbing in the tepid water from the melted ice. There are tiny nubbins of hair and creamy bergs of shaving cream floating on the water, too. That is good; Matthieu shaved before he left. She fishes out a can with a hand showing only the slightest trembling, sets it on the counter, and pops the top with the hard callous at the tip of her right index finger. The finger has popped a top or two before.

It is warm, but good. Foster's. Imported. Not from Australia as you would think, but actually from a brewery in Toronto (*I'll take Beer Trivia for eight-hundred, Alex*). More than twice what they would normally pay, but last night was a celebration - even now Matthieu is downtown at his "ol' buddy" Ham's garage, getting reemployed, this time in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Of course at twenty dollars for the case, there was no way they could eat.

Little Mac drinks half the can, keeping the mallets at bay, and although her innards hitch at the prospect she has them well trained and they quickly settle back to grumbling submission. She sets the can on the wet sink-top and puts both hands palm down to either side of it. She glances at the mirror and catches her own shadowed eyes before she can turn away. Medusa with a looking glass.

"He won't get the job," the face tells her, and she nods. Like the voice seven-years dead always said, *Honey, workers work, and drinkers drink. You gotta play to your strengths.*

Matthieu smiles and music blares from the juke box at the end of the bar:

Hey. Now. The well's run dry -

"Man alive, this is classic shit," he says to no one in particular, but out loud just the same. "Smokin' Joe...what? Like '73?"

He grins a warm cajun grin and drums his hands on the bar top, on either side of the tumbler into which the bartender adds Old Crow and sloe gin to generic amaretto. A splash of lemon juice - bargain basement Alabama Slammer.

"Muchos gracias, mon ami," Matthieu says, taking hold of the glass. Before he can raise it to his lips the bartender lays a restraining hand on his wrist.

"That'll be four and a half," he says. The bartender has the look of Appalachia about him. Long stony forearms, eyes like smoke under a wisp of white hair.

"A'course," Matthieu says, unperturbed. He digs his wallet from a back pocket and flips through the bills. Both of them. He hands the bartender the larger and gets fifteen-fifty back. While the change is being counted out Matthieu takes a deep drink and resumes drumming along with the song. He glances at his wrist where up until Philadelphia his watch used to be, then shifts his eyes to the clock behind the bar.

"Say, you mind if I just start a tab?" Matthieu asks as he is handed his change. He drops the quarters to the bar top as a tip and pockets the rest. "Looks like I may be a while."

The bartender shrugs and Matthieu salutes him with his drink before taking another sip.

The first beer of the morning quiets her insides, more by omission than by correction. The damage is still there, it just matters less to her.

Little Mac drinks it lying in bed, propped up against the wall and looking towards the dark TV set she has no desire to turn on. It is quiet this early in Fredericksburg, Virginia. There is a highway not far away from the motel - the big one - I 95. North to Washington, Bal'mere. Big Mac's New York, eventually. South forever, all the way to

Miami. It is the string from which hang all the tarnished cities of the east and it is busy at all hours, but through the walls of the Holiday Inn it is only a dull sea-shell roar.

Matthieu took the last pack of smokes, but he left three cigarettes on the night stand, placed end to end in a triangle, with a disposable lighter standing in the center. A tower surrounded by a fence; it looks too regular and neatly arranged to disturb, but a smoke is a smoke, is a smoke. Little Mac destroys the tableau and lights one. The first pull makes her cough wretchedly and she nearly drops the cigarette to the bed, but the second is better and the third divine. She smokes it to the filter.

This leaves her only two cigarettes and two beers besides. Not enough. It is only ten in the morning and there is no telling when Matthieu will be back. Out of beer, the truce with her hangover will be called off; out of cigarettes will just be hell. She does not want to go out but the longer she waits the worse it will be.

The clothes she wore yesterday are thrown over a chair. The rest are in her bags in the car, which Matthieu has taken. She pulls on the jeans and a wrinkled T-shirt, a jean vest that used to be a jacket - a frayed white beard around the arm holes. She picks the pea-coat that was once Big Mac's off the floor and goes through the pockets. In one she finds a god-send, a crumpled five dollar bill, another two dollars in change among the other pockets. Enough for something, anyway. She puts on her old battered tennies, the mandatory sunglasses forced through uncombed hair, and slips a warm can of Foster's into each hip coat pocket. The cigarettes and lighter she carries cupped gently in one hand. There was only one room key and it is not here.

It is sunny outside, *God's own high-beams*, Big Mac would have said. Then he would have grimaced and shaken his fist at the sky. He would have set off striding across the motel lot, the first cigar of the day wagging from his clenched jaw as he whistled the song of her name and slapped a hip for her to follow, like she were a collie-dog. Alone she proceeds with less enthusiasm, but as much purpose, and walks in the direction he would

have gone. These are the things he knew and passed on - the habitat of off-ramp motels, the world of exhaust-soaked concrete, stunted bushes, and dead grass. She knows where the gas stations will be though she can't see them from here. She knows that in the right back corner, in sharp view of the convex mirror clearly visible from the register, will be a glass cooler door with the specials magic-markered on post-it notes. Gas station stock: Twelves of the major labels, quart bottles of Colt. 45, tall boys of Busch and Bud. Nothing harder than wino stand-bys: Mad Dog, Thunderbird, Night Train. These are what insure that gas stations always have change.

Away from the motel buildings the wind is blowing cold, and Little Mac pulls her father's coat closer around her. It is November...something...in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and there are spots of blackened snow under the north sides of trees and buildings. Places with southern exposures have melted off, but there are corners the sun will never touch.

"I'm in love," Matthieu declares with a sigh..

He stands in front of the juke box, a huge old thing illuminated from within, holding the second frosty mug of his tab. He reads the names of musicians through the plexi-glass aloud, though the only other person in the place is still the bartender, and he is reading a Richmond paper at the far end of the bar.

"Walsh, Zevon, Pirates of the Mississippi. Thurogood, Van Morrison - man, you got a lot of great shit on here. Very eclectic, very nice." He raises his mug at the bartender in another salute and takes a swallow. The man glances at him briefly, says nothing.

Matthieu gives the music selection one more look then changes the focus of his eyes slightly, so he can see his reflection in the plexi-glass. He looks odd to himself in a tie, in *the* tie, the only one he has. It is black, and so suitable for both funerals and job interviews, the only tie occasions in Matthieu's experience. He turns his head looking at his face, and notices that one sideburn is about a half-inch shorter than the other. He frowns

slightly before moving back to the bar.

He retakes his stool, sets his beer down, and drums his hands on the bar top some more, though there is no music playing. The juke box takes fifty cents a song, a buck for three. He glances around half-hoping either somebody else will come in or the bartender will finally notice the silence. But the door is still and the man is immobile behind his paper, radiating the quietness more than being bothered by it.

"Say, partner," Matthieu calls, removing his wallet. "What's a shot of Jack go for?"

"Two," the bartender says without looking up.

Matthieu nods, and slaps a five on the bar. "Whyn't you give me one of those off the tab, and could I get the change in quarters?"

Marlborough has a two-for-one deal, two packs of reds for a buck-seventy-five. Blessedly cheap, God Save Virginia. The cooler is where she knew it would be, and besides an out-of-her-price-range special on MGD twelves, the best buy is the new flavor of Mad Dog 20/20, Kiwi/Lemon, for \$1.29. She can picture Big Mac next to her; see her father's reflection alongside hers in the glass door, and hear him growl, *What the hell is a kiwi? Who's gonna buy this shit? Yuppie-winos?* Still, a bargain is a bargain, and she takes two bottles of the greenish beverage. He would have done the same.

After the silent transaction with the kid at the register she is left with barely three dollars. The kid slides the coins to her and says nothing, and though she only looks at the change she can feel his eyes on her, as she could feel them on her back from the cooler. Looking at her with suspicion, or just the standard leer? She doesn't know or care. Either way she's too tired to tell him to go fuck himself just now, so she never does meet his eyes. When she's walking for the door he calls, "Have a good'un, Miss," in a tone trying to be confident. It would have been the leer.

Outside it feels colder, though the sun is higher in the sky. Some front of weather

is lurking somewhere just over the highway horizon, waiting to pounce. Little Mac takes the last Foster's from her coat (she drank the other along the half-block from the motel) and pops it open. It is still warm but still better than she suspects the MD 20/20 will be.

She could go back to the motel, but she doesn't have a room key. She could probably get one from the desk, but this would involve some explaining and she has no idea what the room number is now anyway. There are some fast food joints down the same frontage street as the gas station; she can see the bright signs standing in a row further down. All the french-fries three dollars can buy, but what's the point? She is hungry but at the same time the thought of food makes her slightly nauseous. It will be act of will enough to keep the Kiwi Mad Dog down by itself.

There is a sign post at the edge of the gas station lot, pointing directions to car washes and the fast food depots. Beneath these is a smaller brown sign pointing away from the highway and reading "Fredericksburg Park" in white letters. Little Mac has some knowledge of parks also acquired from her father's repertoire, knows them as quiet greenness where a person can sit without someone coming by every five minutes and asking if you're going to buy something.

She follows the arrow of the brown sign away from the highway, drifts slowly inland from the busy trade route and its day-glo plastic waystations. By way of breakfast she finishes the last beer and opens a pack of Marlboroughs.

Matthieu finishes a beer and sets the mug on the bar with a thump. He points at it with one finger, drops the thumb like a pistol hammer, and nods towards the bartender. The juke is playing one of his songs:

*Well if it rains, I don't care,
makes no difference to me...*

"Yeah, it ain't as bad up there as you might think," Matthieu resumes speaking

while patting his shirt down for a cigarette and a match. "Worst thing lots of places is finding a bar that opens before noon."

Matthieu finds his cigarettes but no light. While the bartender is refilling the mug he reaches beneath the bar and produces a wicker basket of matchbooks he slides Matthieu's way.

"Much obliged," Matthieu says, lighting his smoke. He looks at the face of the matchbook. "Shep's Place, huh? That you?"

He looks at the bartender but the man shakes his head. He slides Matthieu the fresh draw.

"Just working for the man every night and day, huh?" Matthieu says, "You don't have to tell me abou-"

"That's five," the man who is not Shep says. "You got enough to cover this?"

Matthieu's smile falters. "Course I do," he says. "You think I'd still be drinking if I didn't?"

The bartender says nothing. Doesn't even blink.

"I ain't a damn low-life," Matthieu says, "I got an interview here in this pissant town today yet."

"Tab don't wait for you to get a job."

"I've got the damn money!" Matthieu says.

The bartender's expression doesn't change, but he shrugs and turns back to his paper. Matthieu looks after him for a moment, then raises his mug and drinks it, all of it. The beer pours into him like a bucket, sloshing with the rest, and the whiskey. He brings the mug back hard to the bar top, gets off his bar stool, and takes his wallet from his back pocket. He takes out the ten, leaving him only a five and some quarters, and slaps it on the bar.

"You can keep the damn change," Matthieu sneers at the impassive bartender, "I'll

take my business elsewhere!" He manages an offended swagger all the way outside and around the corner of the building, where he hitches over, screws his eyes shut, and vomits foam from his mouth and nose.

"Ouch," Matthieu grunts and wipes the back of his hand under his nose. He opens his eyes and looks down at the wet stained tie swinging from his neck.

"Oh, fuck me runnin'," Matthieu mumbles and loosens the knot enough to yank the tie off over his head and drop it to the puddle on the ground. In the wall beside him is a window, painted black on the inside, probably Shep's shitter. Matthieu looks at himself, lips wet, hair screwy, and he chuckles at the image.

"Come here often?" he asks.

The street turns residential. The houses are small but the trees in the yards huge. An old neighborhood, hauntingly nice - homes for those that work hard all week and putter in the yard after church on Sundays.

At least that is the way Little Mac imagines home life to go, she's not working from experience here. Or maybe everybody living in the nice houses of Fredericksburg, Virginia, are suburban satanists or closet necrophiles, or something that would make the lead story on a trashy afternoon talk show. That thought cheers her a bit as she passes before the faceless dwellings, taking the occasional suck from the open Mad Dog she carries with the paper sack twisted around its stubby neck; the other bottle rides along in a wide pea-coat pocket. The kiwi stuff is appallingly bad, but she never doubted it would be.

She reaches an intersection. Another brown sign indicates that the park is down the cross-street to the right, running towards a steep wooded hill Little Mac winces at. She hopes the park isn't on top of the hill; she doesn't feel much like billygoat-ing up the damn thing.

Still, it's either that or sprawl out in somebody's front yard. Maybe crash on a

porch until the happy-home-owners get back from work, then leap up and tell them to get the fuck out of her driveway. Chuck a bottle at them. Little Mac stands at the corner and smiles softly to herself. It sounds like one of the joking suggestions Big Mac used to make to get her to laugh;

Scare holy hell outta the natives!

She glances to her side, for one second almost expecting to see him there with his big hands jammed into the pockets of his coat, the coat she is now wearing, cigar jutting belligerently from bared teeth. Then a look over at her, a wink. A ruffling of her hair, and then that firm hand on her shoulder. But there is nothing there but quiet homes that aren't hers, and the signpost bearing the name of the cross-street, "Sunken Road."

Little Mac tries to force a smirk at the name, then turns and sets off down the road towards the hill. She goes a full block before taking another swig of Dog; before she feels like she can open her mouth without screaming.

Downtown at Ham's, Matthieu looks at the boarded-over windows, at the sickly weeds impossibly growing from the torn concrete where the gas pumps would have been, and he suddenly remembers that Ham has been dead for two or three years. He knew that. Somebody told him, some time ago. Looks like the garage didn't survive Ham long.

Matthieu sits in his idling car looking at the place, thinking he should have thought this through a bit more. Like before they drove a hundred and forty miles down here, should have thought it through *then*. Actually, what he should have done was make a goddamn note to himself next to Ham's address the couple of years ago when somebody had told him the man was *fucking dead*: That would have been the brighter move.

The car stereo is on. John Lee Hooker is growling out "I'm Bad Like Jesse James" via tape. It occurs to Matthieu that "It Serves You Right To Suffer" is ahead on this same album, and he slaps the stereo off with his address book just before he throws it as hard as

he can side-armed at the passenger window. The pages ruffle as the book bounces to the seat, and Matthieu drops his head to the steering wheel.

He can't go back to Little Mac without something. This is getting serious now; after that stupid case of import beer last night (which Mac drank most of anyway!) they are just about flat done-out, money wise. Just about every wise.

"Son of a bitch," Matthieu mumbles to himself. His neck hurts from heaving outside Shep's and there's a burning sensation creeping around the insides of his nostrils. Without the stereo on he can hear the noise outside the Chevy, and even though Fredericksburg, Virginia, is only a shadow of the cities he has stumbled among for his entire life, it is full of the same formless gnash of sound; like everything is either rising up or falling down, and Matthieu feels it all pressing him into the ground with its hostile weight.

There are other garages in town. That idea gives him an inch of breathing room, until he considers the odds of someone he doesn't know giving him, with his shoddy record, work. Sure, waltz in with puke on your breath and see if somebody needs a brake job.

Matthieu raises his head from the wheel just far enough to let it thud back down with emphasis.

He needs a plan, he needs an idea. He needs a drink.

That thought opens his eyes again. That would be very nice, and very easy, and hardly the first time. He could find the nearest establishment selling something strong and cheap, forget about any preexisting casual ties, and throw money towards the bar until his pockets were empty, and thereafter rely upon his own cajun smile and Lou'sana wink, and the kindness of some new stranger. Wasn't that how he and Little Mac had hooked up to begin with?

And Little Mac...

So he can't. He always could before, but not now. Something has gone on here, and he cannot at this time cut bait and head for the shore. He realizes this now, when he should have at least realized it in Philadelphia, when he hocked his watch, the watch his brother gave him.

Matthieu raises his head from the steering wheel and looks over the dead garage lot, but not at it. Fredericksburg, Virginia, was a bust, but I 95 stretches a long way south. The next stop will work out, or the one after: Something will, and they'll both be there for it.

Matthieu straightens and puts the Chevy back in drive. He pulls the car in a big arc through Ham's lot, and noses back onto the street. He is one bad Jesse James of a resourceful mother fucker and this is all just a goddamn speed bump and he's come up smiling from worse before, and this time it is more important, because it is not just him. Not anymore.

And to prove it, Matthieu pulls over at an Amaco station on the way back to the motel and buys a cold twelve for Little Mac. He leaves it on the passenger seat and does not touch it til he gets back to the Holiday Inn and finds her gone.

It is much later, and some weather is blowing in over Fredericksburg, Virginia. The wind picks up and the light of the sky weakens. Near Mac is the hunched statuary of the Kirkland Monument; two figures put up to remember a Rebel soldier that couldn't take the crying of the Union wounded in the cold night after the battle - who went out between the lines to give them water and hold their hands while they died. In the afternoon light the shadows of the monument gradually fade from sharp relief to a grey blur on the trimmed grass.

Little Mac sits on a bench nearby, in front of the bullet-riddled Innis House. Behind her is the restored Stone Wall, and beyond that the hill called Marye's Heights rises

to its crown of cannon, marking where Lee's artillery stood all the years ago. This is not quite the type of park she expected, but the bottles are empty just the same. Her head is more than a bit swimmy and she is somehow glad for that: It turns out that Fredericksburg, Virginia, is not a place she could handle dead sober. She has read all of the plaques around the path and all of the brochures in the visitor displays by the bathrooms, and while some of it has been, well...moving; there are some bits of info that she would have preferred to have done without, like the descriptions of what cannister artillery shot would do to a man.

A car approaches from the south along the Sunken Road, all but the top hidden behind the Stone Wall. There has been some small amount of traffic on the Road all day, and each and every time it has struck her as wrong. She'd be sitting there picturing fully the battle in 1862, imagining the Irish Brigade making its doomed charge at the Wall, and right through the middle of it drives some dickhead in a Hyundai. They should not let cars on the Road.

But the top of this new car slows, and finally halts. The driver's door opens, and Matthieu emerges and stands up behind the Wall, looking towards her from the Confederate rifle positions. Little Mac shivers on her bench.

"Mac?" he calls. The overcast sky has made the day a bit dim at the foot of the Heights. She raises an arm at him, waves him on.

"Pull into the lot," she says, her voice cracking as these are the first words she has spoken in hours. "You can't park there." She starts to cough, and she grinds out her cigarette against the bench.

Matthieu looks ahead to the entrance to the parking lot, past the end of the Wall. He gets back in the car and drives around.

Little Mac looks at the smoldering butt she holds, then glances towards the nearest trash can, many steps away. She has little confidence in her current ability to travel the

distance without pitching headlong, but doesn't feel right in just tossing the butt on the ground here either. She gives it one more hard extinguishing rub over the bench, and drops it in a pocket.

Matthieu's Chevy pulls into the empty lot, and he parks it across two spaces. Little Mac doesn't look at him as he approaches, leaving the car running, the radio on loud. She doesn't recognize the music, but its name is not important. As she will always remember the burnt-carpet stench of cheap Swisher cigars in the air around her father, she will always remember the air around Matthieu as full of nameless music.

"Christ, I been looking for you for an hour," Matthieu says. She can hear the soft, sluggish edges on his words, knows what they mean.

"I've been here," she says. Her own voice is slurred, too. She finally looks up at him, at Matthieu. In one hand he is grasping the edge of a MGD twelve, drooping like the box is half empty. His ever-present smile is beaming infectiously forth, though now it sets Little Mac to thinking about Louisiana. Rebels.

Matthieu stops in front of her. He glances at the hill, looks all around at the markers and cannons.

"So what is all this?" he asks.

"Federigs..." she stops, takes a breath, starts again, "Fredericksburg National Battlefield Park."

"Oh yeah?" Matthieu looks at the houses surrounding the small field. "Right here in the middle of town?"

"This wasn't the middle of town then," Little Mac says, "The town grew up around it." She knows that he doesn't really care, knows he is only trying to keep her from asking about the job. She is too tired to mention that anyway. She does not have the energy to nod acceptance at whatever glib excuse Matthieu has spent the day creating.

"Huh," is all he says for now, then settles down next to her on the bench and pats

her leg with one hand, rubs at her knee. Though her sense of smell is only negligible after half a lifetime of cigarettes, she can smell the booze on Matthieu, or maybe just feel it.

"So tell me all about it," he says, nuzzling against her, still working to keep her off the other subject.

Little Mac sighs and looks towards the Wall, the Road, the Heights. There is a lot here, all that she has been reading all day, but she says only, "A bunch of Union guys kept charging that wall over there, like fourteen times, I think. About nine-thousand of them got mowed down by the Rebs, by rifles and cannons."

Matthieu snorts, like he's amused. Little Mac turns and looks at him darkly. "That's funny?" she asks.

"Well, fourteen times?" Matthieu shrugs. "You'd think they would have caught on before that."

Little Mac feels a sudden warm burn of anger in her throat. All day she has been thinking of the poor men being torn apart by cannons. Thinking of the first unit in, New York's Irish Brigade, marching into the fire to the time of their regimental bands, under their emerald battle flags. Picturing the face of every soldier as her father's. She thinks he would have wanted to go out like that, if he'd ever had a choice.

"So what happened with Ham?" Little Mac fires at Matthieu, but he just shrugs again.

"Wasn't hiring," he says. "Doesn't really matter though, I got a better idea."

He starts talking about Wilmington, North Carolina. Some old buddies of his that own a marina. Little Mac hardly listens. The names are different but she's heard it before. She just stares off towards the cannons facing them from up on the hill until Matthieu trails off.

"I guess we should get going again then, huh?" she asks.

Matthieu nods and gets back to his feet. He switches the beer to his other hand and

offers her a bent arm. "Your chariot awaits," he says.

Little Mac doesn't take his arm. She gets up by herself slowly with her feet apart, swaying like she's far out at sea. Matthieu just waits with one eyebrow raised, but Little Mac steps around him, and starts walking unevenly towards the Wall. As woozy as she feels, she has little reason to think that she can make it all the way there, but then did anyone who ever marched at that wall all the years ago really think that they would get there? She can almost hear the Irish Brigade's bands playing the song of her name, and she steps off towards the wall in time.

She gets closer than most of them ever did, before her eyes rise to the silent cannon on the hill and her feet lose their way on the ground. She stumbles and hits the grass with a sharp cry, and Matthieu is there instantly at her side, rolling her gently up against himself. Mac's depth perception is already shot, and the fall didn't help: She can't immediately tell if Matthieu is hunched beside or above her. The world is spinning; a reel of grass, stone, and darkening sky, and her ankle starts to throb somewhere down far below. Matthieu supports her, propping her up, and she can hear cool, comforting, but indecipherable accented words in her ear, and she feels a freshly opened can being brought to her lips, and a hand lightly touching her hair. She drinks, the world slowly steadies, and she sees the sun set behind the Kirkland monument, though in the fading light the silhouettes of the two enemies are as one.

FLIPPER THE STRIPPER

There is a good four things wrong with this Monday morning.

First and foremost is just that: It's Monday, first day of the work week, though of course everything you earn today is going to the government. Which begs the question, why the hell show up for work?

But like a putz I do, and so there I am smack dab in the midsection of the second reason this is shaping up to be a truly lousy day, which is the work itself. See, I'm a stripper.

No, no, no, not one of those. I don't shake my money-maker for anything but purely recreational purposes (not that "Chip'n'Dales" or whoever have been exactly beating my door down). No, what I do to pay the rent is strip photo-reagent off panels of little metal parts that go into pacemakers and computers and missile guidance systems and God-knows-what-all. The photo-reagent is this grapefruit-juice colored goo that goes all over the panels when the parts are laminated and etched out, and you get it off with a line of tanks full of Pratta brand hot stripper, weak hydrochloric acid, and alcohol, with rinse tanks in between. Then you dry the panels in ovens, or with towels for the smaller, more delicate stuff. That's what I do; soak and rinse and dry these panels, for ten hours a day, four days a week. Or five, on glorious time-and-a-half, if we're behind. And we are pretty much always behind.

I'm a stripper, and as such, my Monday's are lousy from the get-go. This particular one I'm talking about now doesn't stop there though: It's also raining out, which is hardly rare for Tacoma, but means that on cigarette breaks everybody will have to huddle against the wall out by the loading dock, like we're all guests at the St. Valentine's Day Massacre. Really blows dog, as the kids are wont to say.

Fourth and finally, something is up. Up as in jammed up, screwed up, or the explicative of your choice, up. I know this because I've been doing my little strip gig here at Kirkson Parts, Inc. for some years now, and after that long I can read the signs. No, not the ones that say don't drink the hydro, I could read those when I got here. I mean the signs that say the shit is starting to circle in the air, looking for a fan.

One end of the room where the Strip and Prep decks are goes up to the front offices, and all morning there's been quite the hub-bub going on out there. People keep scurrying by past the door talking real fast (though I can't make out what they've been saying from my deck, not over the country music on the radio), and about twenty some-odd minutes ago the Lord of the Manor, Wayne Kirkson himself, went barreling through here heading for Inspection, with his tie and two supervisors, Bruce and Sharon, flapping behind him. Wayne is the owner of our fine establishment and he's usually only in here once or twice a week (providing he's not in Barbados, or some-damn-where), and even then, it's never at 8:30 in the morning. I don't know what it is yet, but something, sportsfans, is most definitely up.

Besides keeping half an eye and ear on the door up front, I've spent the last hour and a half since I rolled in doing the Monday morning change on my strip and hydro tanks. The line is ready to go, except for strip tank two, which is stuck at 114 degrees. So I'm stirring it around with a sawed-off broom handle, trying to coax it up to 130, when from behind me I hear somebody start softly singing:

"They call him...Flipper...Flipper...Flipper the..." a longer pause, "...Stripper."

I look away from the steaming Pratta, over my shoulder. Geraldine Fenwyk is standing on the floor, leaning with her forearms against one of my drying tables, and a sneaker dotted with orange stains from the etchers tapping against the deck (the purple goo dries orange). She's pointing at me, and from the end of her extended finger, in a yellow rubber glove, a circular part hangs from a wire hook.

"For me?" I ask, and Geri nods.

"Don't say I never gave you anything," she says, and manages a smack from her nicotine gum. Geri's one of half dozen college kids Wayne takes on through a temp service, just for the summer. They do most of the grunt/scurrying work over the heavy months. Geri, for instance, is a runner. She takes parts from Cutting to Prep to Printing to Lamination to Etching to Stripping to Inspection to Packing, and back and forth and in between and all over the damn place. We tend to get a real high turnover among the college kids, and there will probably be twenty of them through here for the six openings in the next three months. Turns out that philosophy and what-not majors can only stand feeding rolls of metal sheets into a cutter for just so long, before they bolt for a bar, or a library, or whatever.

Geri might hold out though, she's got a decent attitude and seems to keep herself amused, running around all day. She's maybe a bit too chipper in the morning, but that can be forgiven as she is definitely easy on the eyes. Right now she looks grand with her hair back in a pony-tail, and across the room on the Prep deck I can see that Cowboy Doug is enjoying the view from behind.

"So you going to strip for me or not?" Geri waggles the part around over the table and tilts her head. I've got to grin at that. I take the stirrer out of number two and set it aside, then take the part by the hook. It's a circle of metal about four inches across, and a fraction of a fraction of an inch thick. It has been etched already, so the fine spidery design is covered with purple mucous.

I hook the wire over another sawed-off broom stick and then set that lengthwise across the top of tank one, with the part hanging down into the Pratta, and hit the timer above it. Seconds start clicking off, and I notice Geri is still hanging around at the drying table, looking at the smoke coming off the stripper. The Pratta stripper, not me.

"So what is this?" I nod towards the sunk part. "First sample of an Eagle order?"

Geri nods, "Yeah, Len wants it back when it's clean." Len is the head etcher, king of his domain, like I am of mine.

"I thought we were going to finish that Honeywell order this morning."

Geri shakes her head. The radio is over on Doug's Prep deck and he's got it tuned to a country station. Some twangy, whiny thing is on. Geri rocks back and forth on her heels in time and starts making little rumbling Elvis-y noises in the back of her throat, too quiet for Doug to hear.

"No can do, Stripper man. Etcher one is down, so Len's trying to get two going on the Eagle order."

"Down and out?" I ask. Geri shrugs.

"Don't know, but it sure sounds pretty sickly. A lot like this song." She glances behind her over at Doug, who is rinsing a plastic bucket full of pacemaker battery cases out at the sink with his back to us, and humming along with the radio. Geri looks back at me and rolls her eyes. "Don't you usually have that radio?"

"He got here first," I say. The Eagle sample has been in the stripper for a minute and a half now, which is long enough for a single part. I take the hook off the stick and lift the part out, the goo has dropped off and left it shiny silver. I rinse it in two water tanks, shaking it out good between, and hang it into a tank of diluted hydrochloric acid for another ninety second soak. I turn back to Geri, who has walked along at the base of the deck. The deck is actually just a step up from the floor, but it runs about forty feet along the tanks and the white fume hood that hangs over them.

"So is that why Wayne is running around here?" I ask, "Because of the etcher?"

Geri raises an eyebrow. "Wayne's here? Monday morning? What, is the building on fire?"

"You haven't seen him in etching?" I ask. Geri shakes her head.

"Huh," I say, and look back towards the door to the front.

We make a little more small talk about the weekend, though neither of us did much of anything. After the part comes out of the hydro, it gets another rinse, then goes just briefly through two alcohol baths. I always thought it was kind of funny that here at this high tech company making parts where .001 inch can ruin a whole run, an important stage in the process is sticking them in alcohol and "jiggling" them around. How's that for precision?

I could put the Eagle part in the oven, but it's just as easy to hand-dry it by itself. I do that, laying it down careful between spotless white cloths, and rubbing over it with a balled-up towel, both sides, then put it back on the hook and hand the shining silver circle back to Geri.

"Right then, off I go!" she says, and turns back for the door to etching. "And hey, I'll see if I can't get the skinny on why the boss-man cometh."

"You do that," I nod. Then I notice that Doug has ducked out for a pee break, so I go steal back the radio.

The Eagle run apparently looks good to the naked eye, so Len starts sending whole panels of eight through his etcher. Geri starts bringing them over by sets of four, carrying them on upside-down plastic lids, like they are pizzas. Soaking wet, purple reagent stained, pizzas. After I've stripped the first twelve panels she takes them over to Ving in inspection. It'll be at least five or ten minutes until he gets the official okay or nay back to Len, so I take the opportunity to peel off my gloves and duck out the back.

Len had the same idea. He is already out by the dock, pressed up against the wall with rain coming down in a drizzle over the edge of the roof, just about two inches in front of the end of his cigarette. Len's a thick-set, little guy, and his eyes are close together so he looks like he's glaring at something even when he's not, though he usually is. I light a cigarette myself and scoot out next to him.

"Hey Flip," he says. He still has his rubber apron on and it's getting a little wet. Old orange etcher fluid is starting to drip to the asphalt from the bottom. I've got my apron on too, but it's nowhere near as goosed up as his.

"How's your wife and my kids?" Len asks me.

"We sold those ugly freaks years ago," I say back, and lean against the wall next to him. Me and Len have worked here the same amount of time, so by now we probably have a couple of months in mutual cigarette-break time built up. I point at the orange ring forming in front of Len's stained shoes. "What the hell have you been doing over there? Looks like you ran yourself through an etcher."

"You're not far off," Len sneers. "I've been hip deep in number one's guts for the better part of an hour. Flipper, I think she's had it for good this time." Len crosses himself with his cigarette butt, then flicks it away into the rain.

"That why Wayne's here today?" I ask, but Len shakes his head.

"Not so far as I know. Geri said you saw him in here this morning, but we ain't seen him in Etching yet. Lucky for him, too." Len turns so he can gesture in front of him without sticking an arm out in the rain. "You know, we never had this kind of shit, everything falling apart, until Wayne cut out the contractors and tried to do all the upkeep protocols in-house. Not to mention the damn cleaning; have you gone in the john over by Cutting for a while? Christ, it's like the end of the goddam world in there!"

That 's all true, of course. Heck, up to three years ago we were running two stripper lines with four guys full-time, and now it's just me and a temp kid two or three days a week. Things are tough all over, and I'm about tell Len as much, but get interrupted by a long roll of thunder. Not from the weather, from a plane. Kirkson Inc is positioned right in the flight path for SeaTac, and all day the big planes are coming in low on their final approach, gear down, looking so big like you could stand on your tippy-toes on the roof and reach right up and grab a wing. Me and Len turn and look up as this one comes

in through the rain shaking the whole dock.

"Hope he slides into the Sound," Don narrows his eyes at the jet as it disappears behind the warehouses across the way.

"Powell! Gant!" a woman's voice barks out right beside us. It sounds just like Sharon Granger, the front office supervisor, and both me and Len jump and look guiltily in her direction. It's not like it's a big deal that we're grabbing a quick smoke or anything, it just doesn't look good on a day when Wayne is here.

But it's not Sharon, it's Geri again. She snuck up on us along the wall while the plane was going over, and now she just puts her hands behind her back and blinks innocently.

"Goddammit!" Len snaps. Geri gives a little laugh and ducks out into the rain, then squeezes against the wall between us. She usually sidles up next to somebody on a smoke break. She says she quit a month ago, but still needs the smell now and again. She also tends to break down and hit somebody up for one by midafternoon on real slow days, while still claiming she no longer smokes (they don't count if you bum them).

Geri closes her eyes and inhales deep through her nose. "Ah," she sighs, "I love the smell of wet tobacco in the morning. It smells like...wet tobacco in the morning."

"Don't you have any work to do?" Len says. Not like he himself is hurrying back in.

"Not at present, Ving's still checking the panels." Geri opens her eyes and looks from Len to me. "Anything else on your mind?" Again with the innocence.

"You find out why Wayne's here?" I ask.

"I did indeed." Geri nods. "He and the supe's were ransacking the crates in Inspection for a good part of the morning. Ving was, of course, naturally curious."

"What are they looking for?" I ask. Len is looking curious too, and Geri's clearly enjoying dragging us along.

"Well, Wayne was apparently rather tight-lipped about the whole thing, didn't want to say. But Ving cornered Bruce a little later..."

"Would you cut to the damn chase already?" Len snaps. Geri looks at him and smiles, "Gimme a cigarette." Len grumbles, but does, and Geri sticks it in her back pocket for later.

"Well?" Len demands.

Geri's grin widens. "They're looking for gold."

"Gold," Ving confirms, "Least a hundred pounds of it."

The three of us, Len, Geri, and me, are in Inspection, standing in a semicircle around Ving's table. There are eight of the tables in Inspection, high things with dense plastic tops, lit from inside. The whole area is kept just real clean and precision looking, even though there's generally several crates of parts and battery cases piled around on the carpet. Ving is the only one here this morning, and when we came in he was hunched over the first few panels of the Eagle run, sliding the parts under a wide magnifying glass attached by a multi-jointed black arm to the table-side. Now he has pulled off his silk gloves and is giving us the low-down.

"Bruce says he checked Plating before he locked up Friday night, and it was still there. This morning, poof!"

"Hang on," Len says, "What the hell was it doing here? We haven't gold-plated anything in more than a month!"

"Got an Ambrecht order next week," Ving says, "Gold's been here since Thursday."

"I didn't see it."

"Len, they don't write 'Gold' on the side of the crate," I tell him myself. "If you didn't go hide in the crapper every time a truck comes in, you'd know that."

Geri snorts. "I always wondered why I never saw you helping unload."

Ving shakes a scornful finger Len's way, and calls him a "Razy American," which is a running joke, as Ving's family is Thai or something, even though they've been in the states since like...well, forever.

"So why was Wayne looking for it in here?" I ask.

"He wasn't, they were going through Packing," Ving jerks a thumb at the back door of the room. "We're talking about a whole damn crate here, you know how much those bastards weigh. Wayne's probably hoping nobody could have just got it out in a car, so they were opening up everything we've got waiting, seeing if anybody was trying to ship the shit outta here along with the orders."

"No dice?" Len asks.

"Nor gold neither."

"So where are Wayne and his lackeys now?" Geri asks.

"Back up front, figuring out what the hell to do now, I 'magine."

We all sort of nod and look thoughtful. Then a thought occurs to me, and to Len at the same time, Our heads both jerk and we look at each other.

"Uh-oh," Len says, and Ving nods at us.

"What?" Geri says, "I can see the light bulbs over your heads."

"So it got nicked over the weekend," Len says.

Ving nods.

"And nobody busted in here, that they can tell, right?" I add.

Ving shakes his head.

"So it was an inside job..." Geri prompts us.

"Somebody with a key," Ving finally voices what we're thinking.

Geri looks at the three of us, "Okay, so that's Wayne, Sharon and Bruce,"

"And the area heads," Len mutters, and the three of us each get our key rings out

of back and shirt pockets. We hold them in front of us like we're going to knock them together and activate our Wonder Triplet powers.

We just stand there for a minute, until Len finally sighs and says, "Crap." Then he looks around and gives us a tired-looking smile. "Anybody guess who's up first?"

Cowboy Doug snagged the radio back while I was in Inspection, and it's twanging away over on his Prep line again. I've been watching him for a bit, thinking that technically he is the head of the Prep area (he's also the only one that works over there), though I'm not sure if he has a key or not. Only one's I'm sure about are me, Len and Ving, Arnie in Cutting, Flo in Lamination, and Dorothy in Printing. While I'm trying to think if anybody else might have one, Geri steps in front of a drying table, faces me up on the deck, and says, "Looks like Etching's closed down for a while."

I look at her. She's been running panels over here for about an hour, but now her hands are empty.

"Len in the office?" I ask, and she nods.

"Bruce came and got him just now, said that Wayne would like to speak with him. How'd he know they were going to talk to him first?" Geri asks.

I sigh, "Len has a record. Kid stuff really, cars and what-not. He did a couple years, though. For theft."

Geri opens her eyes wider. "Really?"

I suppose I frown at her. "Look, Len wouldn't have stolen anything from here. I mean sure, he bitches constantly about the place, but so do we all. It's not all that bad a job though, and Len's not going to work it for twelve years and then all-of-a-sudden decide to boost a box of gold."

Geri looks like she just got hit over the head. "Twelve years?" she says, "Working here?"

I must be getting pretty miffed at the whole morning, because that comment bugs me a lot more than it probably normally would.

"Hey," I say, pretty sharp, "In case you haven't noticed, we're not all just here between semesters, kid."

Geri looks honestly embarrassed, which makes me feel kind of bad for snapping at her, even though it was a low-grade snap as snaps go. She really has been decent to work with, and she never slacks like most of the summer help does. She only slacks as much as us long-timers.

"Flip," she says, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean anything..."

"It's okay," I tell her, "I guess I'm just kind of jumpy this morning "

I'm leaning against a drying table on my elbows, facing Geri over it. She reaches up there all of a sudden and gives my arm a squeeze.

"I'm sorry," she says again, and just looks at me. Then she turns around and goes heading back for the door to Etching.

I'm a bit surprised, and I just watch her all the way out of the room. Then I glance over at Cowboy Doug's deck and find him giving me his widest shit-eating grin. He rolls his eyes back and makes a gesture with his hips, I answer him with a gesture of my finger.

We go in shifts on lunch; everybody gets an hour between ten-thirty and one thirty. I take mine early today as Etching still isn't sending over any new panels, and it's just me and Flo from Lamination, but she's on the phone at one side of the break room, so I'm eating alone at a table by the front windows. Looks like the rain's pattering out. I'm munching a tuna salad sandwich when Len comes flying through the door behind me and gooses me in the side, screaming, "No one expects the Spanish Inquisition!" I just about spew tuna all over the table.

"Len, Goddammit!" Flo screeches across the room with her hand cupped over the

phone, "I'm talking to my kid's teacher!" Flo's hair is back in a big steel-grey bun (so it won't get caught in the sliding machinery of the laminator) and she looks pretty fierce. She gives Len a big time stink-eye and he cringes in terror. Then he slaps me on the shoulder and bawls, "Smoke break!"

I stick the other half of my lunch in the break fridge and we go back through the building to the dock. The rain has stopped, so we don't have to press against the wall while we light up.

"So what happened?" I ask. Len's not wearing his rubber apron but he's still got on a pair of sneakers just stained to beat all hell. He sticks one foot in a puddle and shakes it out, flinging little orange globs around on the pavement.

"Y'know, I bet I stained the fuck out of the carpet in Wayne's office!"

"Len," I say. He waves his hands at me.

"Nothing happened!" he says, "Wayne puffed himself up like one of those fish and gave me the whole nine-yards of, 'company property, gone missing, hurumph, hurumph!' Never once said, 'Oh, and by the way Gant, you're suspect numero uno.'"

"You think he thought that?" I ask.

"Course he thought that! I'm the only guy here with a record in the charts, as they say. But he wouldn't say that, of course, so I did."

"Oh geeze, Len!" I can't help myself at that point, "What are you, retarded?"

Len gives me a big smirk. He's got his cigarette jammed in one corner of his mouth, which right there is probably the limit of Len's best James Dean impression. Still, he's got a happy rebel look in his eyes he probably hasn't had since he got out of a jail fifteen years ago.

"Would you relax, Flipper? Relax! All I did was speak up and tell Wayne that I knew why I was there, and then I asked him if he actually thought I was stupid enough to sneak in, boost a fortune in gold, and then show up for work Monday and spend the

whole morning trying to jury-rig enough of etcher one to keep turning out panels? Does this sound like the actions of a man with no loyalty to the company teat?"

"So'd he fire your ass?" I ask.

Len shakes his head. "No. What he did," Len flicks his smoke away and steps closer, "was apologize, *apologize*, for wasting my time. And then he said he was going to get a machinist in here to look at number one, this week!"

Len holds his hands out in front of him, palms up, and I go ahead and give him the slaps. He's higher than a kite and he immediately announces at the top of his lungs to the empty dock that he's going for a long lunch. I beg off to go finish my tuna.

On the way back to the break room up front, I wonder about Len's talk with Wayne. I know it didn't go like Len said, otherwise it wouldn't have taken the hour-plus that it did. The way I figure it, Wayne probably already knew that the head of his Etching area wouldn't have stole from Kirkson Parts, Inc. Wayne probably just needed to talk to him confirm for himself that Leonard Gant, at this point in his life, is not a guy looking for anything bigger than a regular job he's gotten good at, and a little orange-stained part of a dirty building where he can be king.

I wonder if Wayne's going to want to talk to me today too, or if he already knows that I'm just as beat as Len, so why bother?

The rest of the day is pretty slow, uneventful. Wayne is still in the building, up front somewhere, but he doesn't send the supe's back to fetch anybody else to his office. He just sits up there and stews, I guess. I still feel a little bad about the back-and-forth with Geri, and she must too, because neither of us says much as she drops off and picks up panels. I keep tally on the Eagle panels that come over from Etching, and by four it's close to a hundred have been stripped and sent on to Inspection. The order is for 256, but even if we can finish it today and tomorrow, we're already backing up on the Honeywell run.

Looks like we'll all be working again Friday.

I had a couple cans of soda with lunch, and by four I've got to unload them. I leave my deck and head up to the rest rooms in front, but when I push open the door the first thing I see is beige slacks bunched up on the floor around an expensive looking pair of shiny black shoes, under the door of the one stall. Wayne Kirkson himself, in the dumping flesh. I don't go in, but all that soda is starting to slosh around, so I go around to the less-frequented john way back by Cutting.

Len wasn't kidding when he said the place had seen better days. The air in there is just foul, the only paper towels are all balled up and spilling out of the garbage that probably hasn't been dumped in a month, and the urinal is bleeding suspicious colored water through cracks in the bottom of the porcelain. It looks bad, but I'm not about to risk a look in the stall, so I use the urinal and hit the flush with an elbow.

I'm wondering if touching the mildewy pink sink will actually be less sanitary than not washing my hands at all, when the whooshing flush of the urinal cuts out with a sucking growl, and I hear water start to patter to the floor from inside the stall.

My first impulse is just to leave, whistle nonchalantly, and make for my area on the other side of the building. I don't though; maybe me and Len *are* both the gutless company-wonders Wayne seems to think we are. I go to the stall door, which has an "Out of Service" sign on it, and is only held shut with a strip of duct tape. I can still hear water overflowing in there, and even though I'm no plumber and the extent of my plan is pretty much to jiggle the handle, I pull the tape off and let the door swing open.

The overflow has already slowed, and it finally stops at some point during the several minutes that I stand there staring into the stall. The floor is soaked by then and I'm standing in this big scummy puddle, staring at the wide, unmarked crate, resting up on top of the bowl.

At six, Wayne cuts everybody loose. He knows by the backlog that we're going to need a full day on Friday, and he doesn't want anybody to start building up hours that'll turn to over-time before that.

Len, Ving, and a couple of the others are headed down to our regular haunt. Out in the parking lot, Len announces that he's buying, and everybody gives him a cheer. By now, the story is that Len bitch-slapped Wayne until he broke down and agreed to buy a brand new Etcher. Looks like a good time, but I beg off and once all the other cars are out of the lot I drive the other way and park behind one of the warehouses in the same business park as Kirkson, Inc, and walk back

The rain has picked up again, so I huddle across the lot against one of the warehouses with my hands in my pockets, smoking. I feel a little bit like I'm in some Humphrey Bogart movie, but that thought's not really enough to keep me from feeling anything other than lousy.

Fact is, I don't know what the hell I'm doing. Whoever got in over the weekend obviously didn't get the gold all the way out, but I have no way of knowing if they're coming back for it now that the theft's been noticed right away, and the heat's on. If it had been me, I'd probably just decide to leave enough harm done and wait for somebody to stumble upon the booty in the pooper. Like I did.

So maybe I should've just run right up front and told Wayne I found his gold. That would have at least saved me from standing against a warehouse in the rain, but the thing is, I just didn't feel like it.

See, the way it seems to me, is that whichever one of us faithful Kirkson employees it was that pulled the yank on Wayne's gold, whoever used their key after hours and at least started to...well...at least started to do *something*; whichever one of us it was that did that, is doing something that the rest of us would love to do ourselves, but of course won't, as we're all just long-timers at our respective brainless jobs, and totally unable or unwilling to

do anything about it.

So I guess I'm hoping that somebody is going to come back after hours tonight, pull up under the loading dock, and scurry into the building. Mostly, because I just want to know who it is, and then maybe I want to shake their hand, too.

And if it gets on towards real late, and nobody shows...Well, I've been keeping that out of my mind pretty good, but it is true that I know where this crate of gold is right inside the building, and parked nearby is my old Monte Carlo with all that trunk space. I don't know that I have that kind of balls, which is why I haven't been thinking about that, much.

But as it turns out, the waiting doesn't go all that good. The rain after dark is just real damn cold, and this morning I had dressed for a drive to work, not for a stakeout. After I've been waiting for an hour and flicked about half a pack worth of dead butts down a storm sewer, I've had enough and am about ready to am-scray. Then it occurs to me; why the hell am I waiting outside? I'm waiting for somebody who may or may not ever show, just so I can get a look at them, so why the hell don't I just wait inside where it's dry and there's snack machines? I can get behind a stack of boxes in Loading and see the back door a hell of a lot better than I can from across a parking lot anyway!

So feeling wet, cold, hungry, and stupid, I troop across the rainy lot, mount the stairs at the back of Kirkson, Inc., and slide in my key. It goes in neat as you please, and I open the door and step inside just like I was the first guy in in the morning.

It is dark inside and I automatically go for the light switch. I stop though, and think: Can anybody outside see a light on in here? There aren't any windows in back, but with the garage door...does any light leak out under that? I've never looked at it like that and I have no idea, but decide not to risk it. Using only the weak red glow of the exit sign above the back door, I make my way real slow across Loading, keeping one hand on the spools of nickel and steel stacked in racks on the left. Moving that slowly and quietly, I get to the first door and open it. It is the hall down to Cutting, and the light is on. Backing out

of the men's room at the far end is a pair of hindquarters I recognize too easily.

Geri has the men's room door wedged open, and she is carefully guiding out one of the drum dollies, the ones normally used for maneuvering around 55 gallon drums of Pratta stripper and Hydro. The dolly has fat wheels, a wide lift at the bottom that can be cranked up high enough to slide onto a deck, and plenty of back bars to bungee in something as big as a barrel. It is a real handy conveyance, and Geri is concentrating on it hard enough coming through the doorway that she doesn't notice me at the far end of the hall until I say her name. She has the whole thing leaned back at about twenty degrees, straining to keep it at that, and when I call out she squeaks and looses her grip. The dolly swings back to upright, and when the bottom of that crate of gold strapped to it hits the concrete floor, it damn near shakes the whole building.

"I wasn't trying to steal it," Geri says.

We are at the men's room end of the hall. I'm resting with one arm hooked on the grip of the dolly in the doorway, Geri is squatting with her back against the wall, elbow on knee, and one hand stuck in her loose hair. We're both smoking, my last two cigarettes.

"How'd you get in here over the weekend?" I ask.

"I didn't," Geri shakes her head. She flicks the ash of her cigarette and it hits the crate on the dolly. Geri glares at the crate.

"I was still in the ladies' room up front when you guys locked up Friday. All the lights went out, and I shouted for you, but nobody heard me."

She looks up at me with what is, even now, a really fine smile.

"I about killed myself stumbling around in the hallway before I could figure out where I was, and remember where the damn light switches are."

She laughs and takes a deep pull of her cigarette. Like I said, her hair is loose now, and I guess it's the first time I've seen it like that. Everybody keeps their hair pulled back

when they're working around the machines. Geri's has always looked great that way; it looks even better down.

"There weren't any cars in the lot Friday," I say, "And there aren't any now. How the hell were you going to get this out of here?"

"I wasn't! Flip," Geri looks at me, "I don't have a car! I skate to and from here, or I catch a ride! I'm telling you, I wasn't trying to steal this," she throws out a foot against the dolly, doesn't budge it in the least. "Big-ass bastard! I got stuck in here Friday night, and I probably should have just made my way the hell out, but, well...:"

I just wait. Geri sucks on her cigarette some more before shaking her head and going on.

"But it was like the first time I'd ever been in here, you know, alone, so I just sort of hung out for a while and went poking around through all the places I hadn't been in. I sat in Wayne's chair in his office for a while, then went through the lines, and wound up in Plating."

She shoots another nasty glare at the crate strapped to the dolly. If looks could kill and gold could die...

"I found this, got the dolly, and moved it into here," Geri points into the john, "I don't know why, I guess I just thought it would be kind of funny..."

"Funny?" I say. Geri turns back to me and nods, desperately. Like she really wants to explain.

"Funny! That's all, I only meant it like a joke! I thought Sharon or Bruce or another supe would notice there was gold missing after a couple of days and we'd have some big Chinese fire drill, scavenger hunt, sort of a thing! Just something to break the monotony, for Christ's sake! I never thought Wayne himself would come down and start dragging people off for questioning! Jesus, Flip, I didn't want Len or anybody else to get in trouble!"

While Geri says her piece, she's pivoted off her heels and slid to her knees, facing me, not a half foot away. It is sort of a...suggestive...posture for her to be in. But no matter how much I might like to think otherwise, I know the suggestion is really just my own. Besides that, there's other stuff I should be thinking about right now.

"So what the hell were you doing tonight?" I ask.

"Taking it back!" Geri says, moving away from me, standing up, and again throwing out her arms at the dolly and cargo. "I hid in the ladies room again and I was just going to put the damn thing back in Plating, and..." She looks at me again and gives a half-hopeful smile, "And hope everything would work out."

There actually is an unspoken suggestion in that statement, and though I wait a moment, like I'm thinking about it, I already know that I'm going to give Geri a hand getting the loot back to its home, and call it no harm, no foul. At least I would have.

But it is right at that point that the door at the end of the hall, the same one I came through from the dock, bursts in, and there are two cops with their guns out. They both come down the hall shouting at us, and me and Geri just sit there stunned until we're thrown up against the wall and cuffed, just quicker and slicker than shit. Then Wayne Kirkson himself comes down the hall behind the cops, recognizes us and starts bellowing for answers.

And I give them to him.

I have one Robin Hood moment in there, where it actually occurs to me that I can take the rap and feel the wrath, and go down as something maybe not so far removed from a hero. And to be square with you, at some level it is tempting. Real tempting. I mean, I could go up the river, if not for the love of a woman, then at least *for* a woman, and a damn good-looking one at that.

But I don't. I'm straight with Wayne and the cops, with only minor stuff left out. I

tell them I came back to Kirkson just to grab my house keys out of my locker, but then I'm straight about the part when I ran into Geri hauling the gold out of the shitter.

That's when Geri takes up the story and gives them the, "It was just a joke!" line. I believed her when she told me that, and I believe her still. Maybe Wayne believes it too, knows that robbery was never what she had in mind, but he doesn't really care. Plus, he has no sense of humor. He has the cops uncuff me, but then tells them to go ahead and put Geri under arrest. They take her away up the hall, and she looks back at me like this is my last chance to jump in and be the white knight sort of guy. I just stand there.

Wayne starts talking with another cop about whether or not the gold has to be confiscated as evidence, or if it can be wheeled back to Plating and then superheated to melt and cover the parts of next week's Ambrecht order. I'm still just standing where I am, realizing more and more that in the last thirty seconds or so of my life some window of opportunity has flashed by, and I had just watched it go. I feel a bit guilty, and then I get angry at myself for that feeling.

Guilty? For what? Geri had been screwing around and she'd got caught and now she was going to pay, and maybe (if Wayne has anything to do with it) the price would be a bit harsher than is really warranted, but seeing as Geri's a college kid, she probably has a Daddy that can foot a lawyer or two and get her off with a minimum slap on a fine-boned wrist.

And that thought annoys me at Geri. Where the hell does she get off trying to drag me into this, anyway? This is not my summer job we're talking about, this is what I do, period.

Wayne concludes his talk with the cops, just to what ends I don't really hear. I'm still standing there so he put an arm on my elbow and we walk out together, out the dock door and down to the parking lot. There's still a squad car there, along with Wayne's dusky Beemer. Geri and her escort are already gone.

The last two cops are still inside, so it's just me and Wayne in the lot. He asks if I need a ride somewhere, and I tell him no, my car is just behind that warehouse. He nods, then asks why I had parked way over there if I was just coming back for my house keys.

I blank, just look at my boss with my mouth wide open, sure the other shoe is about to fall right square on my melon. But Wayne Kirkson just gives a tight little wince that I guess is as close as he can get to a smile without hurting his face, and nods at me. He tells me to go get some sleep, reminds me that tomorrow is going to be busy if we want to close out that Eagle order. Then he gets in his car and leaves.

It is a fair walk back to my car. Across the dark parking lot and around the side of the massive warehouse, invisible but a huge presence in the dark, I have time to think about things. Things like small angers and jealousies that keep the regular guy in line. Things like honesty and betrayal, truth and consequence, loyalty and stupidity, and all that crap that I suppose is better left to the Philosophy majors that take shitty jobs for a summer, rather than to the kind of guy that has to work that same job to live. I don't know from shades of grey, I only work with stuff that is either stained or cleaned. If it still has goo on it goes in the tanks, if it's clean it goes up the line to somebody else. There isn't any in between.

O(STRICH)

Will's day of feeding the most dangerous animals in the zoo (the tourists) was over by five. That gave him a distinctly narrow hour to get home, clean and change, and get to the bar before his shift started at six. It was a pain, but Tracy was too far along to keep working, and they definitely needed the money.

Zoo food service employees had to park out in Lot K(angaroo), which was a pretty good haul from the west entrance. Will would have jogged it, but the day was just too damn hot, with the sun reflecting off a thousand windshields and washing the lots in a visible wave of heat. Will had left his shades in the car nine hours ago, and he squinted his way all through the lots at a dull plod, head down.

Midway through Lot I(bex), someone from Will's right yelled, "Excuse me!" It was painfully obvious that the call was intended for him, and Will winced. All he needed right now was one more tourist standing under a "Monkey House - 50 yds >" sign and asking, "Say there, fellah? How do we get to the monkeys from here?" Will ignored the call and kept going, head down, but when it was repeated with more desperation, he stopped and looked. Mom and Dad had always raised him as a polite young man, damn the luck.

O! Yeller was a guy probably forty-something, with a couple of kids in tow. They appeared to have just completed their day at the zoo, with the two kids carrying stuffed animals, a dolphin and a tiger. All three of them looked about like Will felt, but then again they probably weren't still going to work.

"Uh, hi," the guy said. He didn't have sunglasses either, and he and Will squinted at each other across the shimmering heat. The guy's hair was thinning out topside, and the glare didn't help matters any. Judging by the angry pink shade of said dome, the guy was in for one hell of a burn after today, and that cheered Will up just a bit. "Do you work

here?" the guy asked.

As Will's green shirt and blue hat both had the zoo logo blazoned across them (with the M of Minnesota shaped like a moose, and yellow antlers sticking from the sides of the hat just in case the graphic M was too subtle) he didn't see much point in denying it.

"This is kind of embarrassing," the guy said. His hair that was left was grey at the sides, and other than the burn he was pale enough to make it obvious he worked indoors somewhere. He wore slacks and a button down shirt, with tennis shoes that looked new, though they were a couple of years out of style. For one instant Will was positive that the guy was going to ask him how to get to the monkeys from here. If that happened, Will was afraid he might have to beat the guy severely about the head and chest with the moose hat.

"We got here about noon," the guy said, "And now I can't seem to remember where I parked."

No monkeys. True, still a largely inane question, but at least there were no monkeys.

"Do you know which lot you were in?" Will asked, as patiently as he could. "They've all got different animal names." So it's easy to remember, you dolt.

"Yeah, I know," the guy said. Sweat was standing out on his forehead and the two kids, a couple of little blonde girls, were hanging behind him like tired shadows. "I meant to look, but I guess I didn't."

"Uh-huh," Will said. Depending on traffic, it was about twenty minutes back to the apartment, and another ten to the bar. This was already cutting into his thirty minute clean-and-change window. "Well, I just work at the food court, but I think the zoo has some parking people that can probably help you out."

"Back at the entrance?" the guy asked. He shaded his eyes and peered back across the shimmering lots toward the main buildings, past H(yena) all the way to A(nteater). The two kids turned and looked back in that direction. The younger of the two held the stuffed

dolphin by the tail fin, snout down on the pavement.

Will sighed. Times like this he really envied people who were total jerks. Some people could just fly off the handle when confronted by stupidity, and feel none the worse for it. But not Will. At heart he was stuck being a nice guy, though he was convinced that one of these days a man-eating ulcer the size of a Volkswagon was going to burst right out of his stomach like something from an Alien movie.

"I'm kind of in a hurry," he began, keeping all but the slightest hint of the martyr out of his voice. "But I can give you a lift back there, if you want."

"I really would appreciate that," the guy said, "Girls, what do you say to the nice man?"

The two kids mumbled something that may have been thanks. May have been, "Where's the monkeys?" for that matter, but probably wasn't. They were obviously tired, but Will thought there might be a little more to it than that. Some kids just came out of the zoo that way. Most of them giggled and screamed all day, and threw ice at the snow leopards, but some got real quiet, like they'd noticed the "Kill Me" look in the animals' eyes. Will wondered if the two kids were getting that look off of him.

Will led the way to his old Pontiac. The AC usually took a good twenty minutes to crank up, so he just told everybody to roll the windows down. The guy held a back door for the kids to get in, then sat passenger side next to Will.

"I really do appreciate this," he said again.

"Sure. No problem," Will said, concentrating mostly on starting the temperamental old car. Once the engine sounded that it had finally caught, he looked in the rearview to back up. The two kids' eyes met him low down in the mirror.

"Uh, be sure to buckle up back there," Will said. He felt momentarily impressed with himself. That had sounded responsible. Parental.

"I don't know how I lost the car," the guy said. "I meant to look, told myself to,

but..." he gave a ragged sigh.

"It happens," Will provided. It did in fact happen, often, which only reinforced Will's dim view of his fellow humans. He got the car pointed the right way and shifted into drive. The two kids in the back were riding along slumped down. Will wondered how old they were. He didn't really know enough about kids to judge an age, though he figured he'd be learning soon enough.

"My wife always used to keep track of that kind of stuff," the guy said. A slightly different note had crept into his voice, and as Will was glancing at the kids in the mirror, he saw both their eyes snap up.

"You married yourself?" the guy asked, gesturing at Will's ring finger on the steering wheel.

"Yeah," Will answered, looking at the silver band. It was almost a year now, but that answer still sounded wrong somehow. Somehow too much like a confession of guilt.

"Really," the guy said, "Any kids?"

"On the way," Will said.

"Hey, that's great," the guy said, though something else in his voice made Will glance at him.

"Daddy?" the slightly bigger of the two kids in back asked, "Is that it?"

The guy turned and followed his daughter's pointed finger.

"Oh, hey! There we are!" the guy said, gesturing at the row of cars an aisle over, "Good eye, honey!"

"That's it?" Will asked.

"Yeah, just a row over, we must have walked right past it."

Will turned at the end of lot E(lephant) and came back in the next aisle. The guy pointed at a blue car halfway up.

"There we...oh wait a minute."

Will stopped behind the Chrysler. The guy turned to him with the same sheepish smile as when he'd asked for help.

"That's not it," the guy apologized. "The color is the same, but I drive a Buick."

"Daddy?" one of the kids asked.

"That's not it, hon," the guy said. He licked his lips and peered all around. "Gee, this really looks like the right area, too. Same lay out."

Will's heart sank. "Are you sure you're on the west side?" he asked. The guy just looked blank.

"There's a west lot and an east lot, and they're both laid out the same," Will explained.

"East lot?" the guy repeated, like it was the final marking on an ancient treasure map.

"Yeah, it's like L to W. Llama, Monkey, N-something, Ostrich,"

"Ostrich!" the guy and his kids said in unison.

Will smiled as best he could, "Ostrich?" Some people's stupidity...

The guy nodded, "Ostrich! I can see the sign perfectly now, we're right by a lamp post with a big bird on it, head in the sand."

Will let up on the brake and accelerated to the end of the lot. "The road in from the highway breaks off into both lots. I can take you around." He glanced at his watch as the car's clock was shot. This idiot was definitely going to make him late.

"Oh thanks, thanks a million," the guy smiled and shook his head, "Ostrich!"

The access road connecting the lots was short. Will was still accelerating half-way along it, when one of the back doors opened.

One of the kids screamed "Shei-ly!" and Will stomped on the brakes, cutting his eyes to the rearview and seeing only one of the girls there. His heart hit his throat and one certain thing flashed into his mind: Oh Christ, she's dead. A little kid just fell out of your

car and bounced along the asphalt and now she's dead.

They weren't going all that fast, but fast enough for Will to jerk hard against his seat belt. The guy wasn't wearing his, and as he was already twisting to look behind him, he banged side first into the dashboard with a grunt. Will felt the girl seated right behind him bump against his seat, she started to cry, and then her younger sister started to cry from the other side of the back seat. She was still back there, she hadn't fallen out.

"Shelly!" the guy barked, twisted against the dash like he hadn't even felt himself bang against it, clawed between the seats and wrapped both his crying daughters up in his arms. It amazed Will; this forty-something bald guy springing like a gazelle faster than he himself had even been able to shift in to park.

The kids weren't really hurt and once their father grabbed them they quit crying immediately. The younger one, Shelly, who'd been playing with the door and popped it open called "Sorry!" and her sister started to laugh.

"Oh, Jesus," the guy said, turning back to Will. "Wow, I'm sorry about..."

"Get out." Will said through clenched teeth. His hands on the wheel were shaking and he was completely pale. His eyes were focused only on the road before him.

The guy blinked. "She's okay, she must have been playing with..."

"Get the hell out!" Will roared.

The guy just blinked at him for a second. Will didn't turn his head, in fact his only movement was a slight trembling. The guy got out and hurriedly scooped up his daughters through the open back door, saying something soothing that Will could not hear. The guy shut the door, and with an effort Will relaxed his leg and took his foot off the brake. The Pontiac rolled forward, and Will clicked the door-lock button on his door.

"I forgot to lock the doors," Will said dumbly. And that wasn't all, of course. He'd told the kids to buckle up, said "Buckle up," then not even looked to check if they did. Never so much as occurred to him that they might not have followed instructions.

Fifty yards farther up the access road Will again stopped the car, shaking so bad he knew he shouldn't turn on to the highway. He looked in the rearview and saw the guy, the two girls, and their stuffed animals standing at the side of the road, looking after him with identical expressions he could not quite read. Turning his eyes slightly, Will saw his own face in the mirror.

"Christ, I can't do this," Will told himself.

BEDLAM

On Saturday, one week to the day after I first meet my Dad, Walter makes his break for the woods, and vanishes.

Walter's run sets the rest of the patient population off. I sounded the alarm myself, and right away the bells generally get most of the less-medicated patients up and shouting, or crying. After the Doctors settle them all down one way or another, the staff that was sent after Walter start trickling back to the Farm without nothing but shrugs. The Doctors meet in the main administrative office behind the desk at the front doors, I guess to figure out what to do now. A group of us staff wait for them right there in the dark lobby, so the Doctors start their talk in the office real quiet, but it gets loud enough for everybody to hear pretty quick.

"Homicidal? For the love of God, Josh, can you tell me just why the hell you had Walter in the general population? Could you explain that to me?"

Dr. Palumbo tears into Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester for a good couple of minutes; his voice comes booming through the door and must be thundering in that little office. Dr. Cester's answers are quieter and higher pitched, and Dr. Palumbo keeps cutting him off anyway. In the lobby us staff sort of just glance around, but not at each other. Dr. Palumbo is usually a nice enough man if you stay on his good side, but he can come down very hard sometimes, like back in '89 when nurse June got killed by Sid, one of the Psychotics. There were all kinds of reporters all over the Farm for about two weeks, and Dr. Palumbo was real nice and serious for all the cameras but inside he was screaming all the time at everybody, and he even fired Dan Waddamaker, one of the observers, who wasn't doing anything but reading an Atlanta newspaper in the lounge that had the headline, "HORROR AT WILLOW FARM: The Bedlam of the South."

"Goddam it, Josh! I don't want to hear nothing about Ritalin reactions! If you even *suspected* Walter might be a flight risk, let alone displaying HT's, you should have put him in the East Wing!"

Something crashes against the wall in there, and the staff in the lobby cringes.

"You remember the East Wing, don't you, Josh? You painted it that attractive shade of pink? You fucking-surfer-dolt-shithead!"

After another five minutes of one-sided shouting the door of the office busts open and the staff waiting in the lobby all jump and try to look like we weren't listening. Dr. Palumbo stomps out and comes to a stop in front of the desk; he narrows his eyes behind his silver-rimmed glasses and glares around at everybody. He's not a big guy but he carries himself like he's seven foot tall. Dr. Wallace comes out behind him with her hands in her lab coat pockets and a minty smelling cigarette in her mouth. She stands off behind Dr. Palumbo, leans against the wall, and tries to look like she's not enjoying this. Dr. Cester is still sitting in a chair in the office, with his head in his hands. The desk in front of him is littered with empty syringes, and he looks sort of like he's trying to hide from them, or just from everything.

"Okay people, listen up," Dr. Palumbo says to us in a hiss that sounds almost like the hisses the roaches in his office make. You can't hear his N'Orleans accent hardly at all. "We have a patient who may or may not be experiencing a homicidal episode loose in the woods, and he is apparently armed with one big mother Louisville Slugger of a flashlight."

Everybody just looks at Dr. Palumbo real serious like, except Dr. Wallace behind him who turns her face towards the wall and bites a knuckle.

Dr. Palumbo starts giving everybody partners and assignments, areas of the woods and grounds we are to search. He sends most all the staff out, calls up those who aren't on shift, and soon there are a good forty people searching the grounds of Willow Farm with flashlights of our own as the sun goes down.

We don't find a blessed thing.

Like I said, it was the Saturday before that my Dad showed up. I got off from work at Willow Farm and went home like usual, and in the space in front of my trailer there's this new car I never saw before. It's a big nice thing, and a deep dark blue, but it's got a lot of road dust on it and the day's not real light out yet, so the car looks sort of bruise-colored: Like when a banger gets their helmet off when you're not watching and smashes their head into a post. The car's plates are out-of-state, they read Connecticut, and I figure somebody has family visiting, maybe Ms. Forester who's trailer is just left of mine, so I park the truck further down and walk back.

My Dad's sitting on my little porch, though I don't know that's who he is yet. All I know is that he's a real thin guy and not too tall when he stands up. His hair's brown but grey back along the sides, and he's wearing glasses like Dr. Pahlumbo's at the Farm - fragile looking with little round lenses - only this guy's have gold frames. I don't know him so I wait for him to say something, and I stay back a ways from the porch on the sidewalk through the lawn. See, I'm a big guy myself and when I'm standing close to somebody, like say in line at the Winn Dixie in town, I guess I kind of crowd them without meaning too. So I stay back from the guy with the gold rimmed glasses, but he looks nervous anyway.

"J-james?" he says, which is my name though everybody calls me Jim, or Jimbo, except for Bobby Lee, the Schizo at Willow Farm who calls me either, "General Pete" or his "Old War Horse."

"Yes sir," I say.

The guy is at the end of my little porch now so we're standing pretty near eye to eye. Even though his clothes are nice - beige slacks and brown loafer shoes and a blue shirt - he's got a sort of rumpled and uncared-for look about him. He studies my face real close like he's trying to read something written too small. "James Braithwaite?" he asks. I

nod. I think maybe I should tell him that people call me Jim, or something, just to be friendly and maybe relax him.

He steps off the porch so now he's looking up at me. He licks his lips real quick with a little dart of pink and he holds out a hand. I can smell smoke on his clothes, cigarette smoke. "I'm Doctor Leslie Vorhees," he says.

I shake his hand and he just keeps looking at me. "Do you know who I am?"

"Sure," I say, "Mom told me lots of times. You're my Dad."

"That's right," he says, and he just keeps on shaking my hand. He doesn't seem to be going to say anything else, so I tell him that people call me Jim.

Growing up wasn't the easiest thing I ever did. I don't mean that I remember it as being really hard, but then again I only grew up the once so I don't have anything to compare it to.

I guess it was a big deal that my Mom wasn't married; she had to leave her family in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and come live here in Tuxedo, Georgia, with her Aunt Emma. Mom told me she tried to write Leslie Vorhees, my Dad, but he never wrote back.

So I grew up with my Mom on the little bit that was left of my Great Aunt Emma's place after she died when I was six. I went to school in Tuxedo for a while, and there most of the kids gave me trouble on account of I didn't have a Dad. I don't know how they found out about that - Mom told people he was just dead, but the kids at school seemed to know different. I never had what you'd call a friend. The kids at least stopped giving me trouble when I had my big growth spurt and shot up to six-foot-seven. Everybody left me be after that.

My Mom took sick so I left school during the eighth grade and got work at a peanut farm, where I could tote a good amount due to my size. When Mom's doctor bills started getting bigger I also got part-time work as a night watchman out at Willow Farm, and after

Mom died I quit the peanut job and just worked at the Farm full time. I think Mom had wanted me to go back to school, but I was eighteen by then and it seemed sort of old to start over the eighth grade. Besides, there was a staff job out at Willow Farm that opened up and paid pretty good. I had never been very smart in school anyway. I think I only passed grades when I was little because the teachers felt sorry for me, and once I was big I think they passed me because they were scared. Even though I never got in fights like a lot of kids, the teachers would sometimes look at me out of the corners of their eyes like they thought I might, even though I tried to stay sort of hunched down and out of people's ways. So I never did go back to school, and after the bank bought what was left of Aunt Emma's place from me I moved to the trailer park out near Willow Farm. And I guess that's where I'll end up.

My Dad says he's a doctor, but not like Dr. Palumbo, or Dr. Wallace, or Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester, or any of them out at Willow Farm. He tells me he is a professor, and he works at a college instead of a treatment facility.

"Mom never said that you were a professor," I tell him. We're in my trailer now. I asked him in because it seemed like that's the thing to do, and outside he was just standing there like he didn't have anywhere else he had to be.

"Well I wasn't then, of course," Dad tells me with a little smile that looks embarrassed and goes away real fast anyhow. "I was only twenty, you know."

I nod. We're standing in the little kitchenette area and my Dad's looking around at the cabinets, and the floor, and the blue curtains with the ducks on them, and pretty much everything but me. I guess he's uncomfortable with the whole thing and there should be something that I should do about it, but I'm not sure what.

"So..." Dad takes a breath like he's going to say something but it just trails off, and he licks his lips some more, like maybe they're dry.

"Do you want something to drink?" I ask him.

His eyes snap back up to me and he nods too quick. He smells fairly strong of some kind of after-shave but he's got a couple days of salty stubble so I don't think he actually has shaved in a while. From a little sour whiff I get through the after-shave every so often I don't know that he's showered for a bit either, and it has been hot this week.

"That would be fantastic, actually," he nods real eager. I step over to the fridge and open her up.

"I've got some orange juice," I say, "or milk, or some Dr. Pepper."

"Oh," my Dad says. "Nothing stronger?"

I shake my head. Dad takes a juice glass half full of Dr. Pepper from me and then goes back out to his car. He comes in with a suitcase - a nice leather duffel sort of thing with lots of straps and buckles - and takes a silver hip flask out of the side pocket. He leaves the bag standing there on the floor in the living room area, and pours out of the flask into his Dr. Pepper and sets it on the table. We both sit down, and Dad starts talking, sipping along. While he's explaining to me about his "sabbatical" he takes a wide pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket. It's a different sort of pack than I'm used to seeing, longer and flatter than what the smokers at the Farm carry, and sort of a fancy reddish-purplish color. The pack reads "Dunhills." When Dad lights one up with a half-gone book of matches from a gas station, though, it's got that same grungy smell as everybody else's.

Dad keeps talking. He's telling me that Mom had written him once before I was born but because he was what he calls, "In my 'Wandering the Earth' period," he didn't get the letter until after. He keeps sipping and smoking real quick while he's telling me this and I keep looking at the ash that's getting pretty long on the end of his Dunhill while it zips around over my table top (he waves his arms a lot while he's talking). I don't want to interrupt him but I start to ease up from my chair towards the cabinet where I've got a clean butter dish, which I figure would do for an ash tray because I don't have a real one. Soon

as I start to move, though, Dad jerks and slides back in his chair and the ash falls off and hits the table top. It holds together and just lies there looking ugly and sad, kind of like in spring when there's an early morning rain that blows off before noon and worms will get stuck out on the sidewalk and fry up into brittle little brown lines.

"Look, you've every reason to be angry with me!" my Dad says real loud and almost panicky, holding his hands up in front of him. They're shaking, and the smoke from his cigarette jiggles in the air as it rises. "I realize that I have been absolutely no kind of father to you for thirty years, and I'm here to apologize to you, deeply, honestly, for that!"

I quit moving when Dad jumped so as not to spook him any more. I speak real slow and soft, like when you're trying to soothe one of the psychopaths at Willow Farm once something wrong has happened. They tend to excite real easy, too.

"I was only reaching for a butter dish, so as you could use it as an ash tray," I say.

Dad looks at me, then glances at his cigarette as if he just now realized he was smoking it. "Oh," he says, then looks at the grey ash worm on the table top. He reaches out and brushes at it, and it breaks apart and leaves a black smear across the yellowed wood.

My Dad moves into the trailer with me. We don't make a big deal of it or anything, actually I don't know right away that he has moved in, his dropping his duffel bag in the living room was pretty much it. After a couple days, though, I sort of figure out that he's not leaving.

I don't see him much for those days as I am working long shifts at Willow Farm this week. When I'm leaving for work the day after he shows up and moves in, Sunday, he asks me about work.

"It's not actually a farm," I tell him, "It's just called Willow Farm on account of it

used to be a farm, and down by the crick on the property there is still a stand of willow trees."

We are eating breakfast, I made a big pile of scrambled eggs. We are drinking orange juice though Dad has added to his out of another flask from his bag. He seems to have a number of them in there.

"So what is it then?" Dad asks. He holds his drink with one hand and the other switches between his fork and a cigarette he leaves sit on the ashy butter dish. "A spa of some sort?"

"It's a treatment facility," I say. My eggs don't taste very good with smoke in my nose.

Dad's fork clatters against his dish. "You mean like an asylum?" he asks, looking surprised.

"The Doctors don't like to call it that," I say. My Dad does something strange then: He laughs. He laughs to himself, shakes his head, and finishes his drink with a swallow. He starts making himself another one right away, pouring clear liquid from his flask on the table and adding just a bit of orange juice that hardly changes the color.

"How perfectly Tennessee Williams!" Dad says, still shaking his head and stirring his drink with a pinkie finger. Where a wedding ring would be on that hand, there's an angry red band of skin. I want to mention to my Dad that we're a good piece south of Tennessee, in Georgia, but I'm not sure if that's what he's talking about.

"So how long have you worked there?" Dad asks, smacking his lips over his first sip of his new drink and still looking pleased. He seems to be a pretty happy guy.

"A bit longer than twelve years," I say, "since just before Mom died."

He stops smiling then and glances at me a little spooked again. He takes another sip before saying, "Oh. Right. I am sorry to hear that. Your Mother was...a good woman, James."

I nod at him, but I'm a little surprised to hear him say that. I always thought he never knew her all that well.

I clean the dishes and pick up my white jacket for work. When I leave the trailer Dad is still sitting at the table, sipping his drink and ashing towards the butter dish.

When I'm going to say something it usually sounds okay in my head. But once I say it I don't blame people for not always understanding what I'm saying, because I think that if I didn't know, if I was just hearing somebody else saying what I'm saying, then some times I might not understand it either. So even though I decide to talk to one of the Doctors out at Willow Farm about my Dad right soon after he shows up and moves in, it takes a couple of days before I have it pretty well planned out just what I want to say.

See, I don't want them to get the wrong idea. I mean I want to talk to them about my Dad because there are some things that he says and does that sort of make me maybe think that I should talk to somebody. But on the other hand, and even though they are all really good folks, I don't know just how serious the Doctors might take it. At Willow Farm lots of people do and say some odd things but it's not always taken the same. I mean lots of times a patient will say something and all the Doctors will get together and talk about how important it is, like when Ronnie, one of the MPD's, started talking with a new lisp and a weird accent, but then other times nobody will pay any mind to something that seems just as strange to me, like the box of four-inch cockroaches Dr. Palumbo keeps in his office. So while I want to talk to somebody about my Dad, I don't know that they might take it real serious and bring him in or something, which I don't think I want, or otherwise ignore it, and sort of look at me funny for asking. So I plan out just what I want to say real careful, and even then I want to try it out on somebody else first.

I work a day shift on the Wednesday following my Dad getting here, and by then I'm ready to talk to somebody.

After dinner the patients who have been behaving well are allowed to go outside, weather permitting, and that day it is sunny and I'm one of the observers assigned to take them. Willow Farm is a big old ramshackle place with tall windows and columns and porches all over. It used to be a plantation a long time before it was a treatment facility. There are lots of spreading green grounds and woods all around it, and in the back of the main building which houses the facility there is a nice grassy slope that us staff keep mowed down short, with white iron benches scattered around under some shady old sycamores. It's nice and cool back there and the patients know that they can't leave the mowed area unaccompanied, so they mostly settle down around on the benches and listen to the music. The music is part of Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester's program and is pumped all through the building real quiet, though the speaker on the roof of the veranda in back is on louder so it carries. Today the music is Pavarotti singing *Brindisi* (I know this because I've heard it a good thousand times before) which is too bad because Dave, one of the Somatoform Disorders, isn't outside on account of him being convinced that Dr. Wallace has stolen his spine. Dave usually sings along with that kind of music, and he has a real nice voice.

John Hernandez is my partner observer that day and he goes out on the grass in the sun with eight of the patients. John plays a little golf on his off days, so he stands out there looking down the hill, and he pretends the big flashlight he's carrying, even though it's noon, is a golf club. He loosens his shoulders and starts doing some swings, acting like he's hitting off over the woods at the base of the slope. Each time he hits he shades his eyes with a hand and peers out over the woods, and some of the patients on the benches do the same thing. See that's what I mean about odd-seeming things being taken differently: John is staff, so he can hit invisible balls out over the woods with a flashlight and it's no big deal, but if he were a patient someone would probably change his dosage.

Bobby Lee is one of the patients out there with us, he is next to me on the veranda

that runs the length of the old house's back side. He is one of the Schizos, so Bobby Lee is not his real name. The Doctors won't let the staff call any of the patients by anything but their real names, even though a lot of the Schizos and Disassociatives and MPD's don't know what their real names are and look at you real funny when you use them, like they're not sure who you're talking too. So when the Doctor's aren't around we usually call the patients by what they'll answer to.

"You want to go on down to the grass, Bobby Lee?" I ask. He can't by himself on account of he is in a wheel chair and there is no ramp.

Down on the lawn John Hernandez gets a hold of a good one and a couple of the Diso Schizos on a bench clap their hands.

"No thank you, Pete," Bobby Lee says with his deep drawl, "I can see fine from our present elevation."

Bobby Lee is an elderly black man who must have been pretty tall when he had his legs. His hair is almost all white except for a grey streak that runs through the center of the pointed beard that comes down almost to the red quilted blankets piled around his lap. His hair on top is bunchy like wool but pretty high on his forehead, though you generally can't see it because he usually wears a slouching grey felt hat with yellow braid. He is the one I want to talk to first about my Dad, but now that we're alone on the veranda I can't remember just how I wanted to say this.

"Uhm, well, you just let me know, okay?" I say.

Bobby Lee turns to me in his chair and pats my arm fondly, "I will indeed, my faithful Old War Horse." He smiles up at me real kindly and I try to smile back but it doesn't come out quite right. Bobby Lee sees it right away.

"General, is something troubling you?" he asks, looking honestly concerned. A lot of the Schizos have different sorts of "Affective" problems, either from their major disorders or as side effects from medications. What that means is that lots of times they

sort of do the wrong thing when something happens, like when Sam's roommate Malcom hung himself overnight and Sam couldn't stop laughing until Dr. Palumbo sedated him. Bobby Lee doesn't have any of that unless he's on a heavy Electro Convulsive week. Normally he's about the sharpest guy on the Farm. Except the Doctors, I mean.

"Well, sort of, yes sir I guess it is," I say, but I don't go on from there. I can't remember just how I meant to start.

Bobby Lee uses his left hand on a wheel to roll his chair back so he's facing me. "General, I do hope that any of member of my command should feel entirely comfortable in speaking with me concerning any matter." He leans forward and takes my hand. His hand is a lot smaller than mine and feels bony, like the skin is just gritty paper wrapped around it. But his grip is real strong when he wants it to be.

Even though I can't remember how I was going to start, all of a sudden I'm talking anyway. There on the veranda in back of the main building at Willow Farm, while John shortens his grip on the flashlight and makes invisible chip shots at a sycamore, I tell General Lee about my Dad the college professor, and the Bobcats that are after him.

I'm taking his word for that, I haven't seen the Bobcats myself, but I have heard them making noise. It will be like this: Me and Dad are eating early in the morning when all of a sudden Dad will drop his fork to the table and hold one finger up in the air. He's got real long, skinny white fingers, and it's like he's shushing me or something, though I haven't been saying anything. Neither has he, because he's not real talkative like usual in the morning, so it's quiet, but he holds the finger up anyway, and I stop chewing. We wait. Dad's wearing those granny looking Dr. Palumbo glasses of his, and he looks up from behind them and flicks his red eyes, they're real blood shot in the morning, all around the ceiling. After a second there's the noise again - something scampering across the curved roof of the trailer. I've been hearing that for years and up until Dad got here I just figured it was the squirrels doing whatever squirrels do in the morning, there's about a million of

them in the trees all around the park, but Dad doesn't think so. He looks back at me and says, "Bobcats!" Then he jumps up and runs around the table as best he can, seeing as how there's not a lot of clearance between it and the wall counter, but he's not a big guy so he manages. And while he's running around he barks at the ceiling, and whatever's up there scurries quicker and the noise goes away. Dad thumps back into his chair and sort of half-laughs to himself and starts fishing in the pocket of the shirt he slept in for a smoke.

I mention to Bobby Lee that my Dad is a drinking man, so I know that a lot of times he's probably confused on a lot of things. He seems pretty sure about the Bobcats though.

"And there's more to it than that," I say, "Sometimes he just starts talking real, well, sort of odd. Like Monday, I was cleaning up the kitchenette, dusting all the cabinets, then wiping down the counters, then draining the fridge, then mopping the floor, and as I'm finishing up I smell cigarette smoke and look over and there's my Dad in the end of the little hall to the bedroom, where he's been sleeping, you know, though it's the middle of the afternoon, and he just looks at me and says something like, 'Politic, cautious, and meticulous. Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse.' Well, I don't know what to say to that, and after another minute he just turns back around and goes back to bed for three more hours."

Bobby Lee listens real close as I tell him this, nodding every so often. I just keep on talking, about my Dad. Most nights he has gone out and he hasn't always gotten back by morning. Since I work both day and night shifts at Willow Farm on different days, we've only been at home together a couple of times, and then if Dad's not eating he's most always sleeping.

"It just seems," I tell Bobby Lee, trying to sort of wrap up because I think I might be rambling and besides that it is almost time to go back in. "It just seems like it's sort of strange, I mean here I don't really know the guy at all, but he's my Dad and he's moved into

my trailer, and I mean except for the first day or two we haven't hardly said two words, not counting these things my Dad throws in like, 'Once more into the breach, dear friend!' when I was coming in to work Monday night and he was going out at the same time. I guess I'm just saying that I don't really know how to make out any of this, what he's saying and doing, I mean."

Bobby Lee nods. "You have not shared any of this with General Grant, I assume?" he asks. I takes me a second to recall that 'General Grant' is what he calls Dr. Palumbo.

"Ah, no sir. I wasn't just sure that..."

"That is most likely wise," Bobby Lee interrupts, narrowing his eyes, "This is just the sort of information he would use as leverage over one of my command."

"So you don't think I should tell him?" I ask. Bobby Lee shakes his head a little wildly. Almost too wildly for a bit, because for just a second it looks like he's having a Dystonic shaking fit, which several of the patients on heavy Haldol or Thorazine programs get occasionally.

"Tell no one!" he snaps, stopping his head shaking and staring up at me. He grabs my hand in one of his, and as John calls from the lawn that it's time to go back in Bobby Lee squeezes hard enough to hurt. I decide to take Bobby Lee's advice for a while, but I change my mind after things with my Dad get worse.

I get off work a bit early Thursday, at about seven. Instead of driving straight home, though, I take the county road into Tuxedo. Thursday is my regular grocery day and I like to go to the store before it gets busy. With my Dad living with me I will need to buy more food, too. The Winn Dixie doesn't open until eight so I park the truck in the lot and wait.

People say Tuxedo is not a big town, though I haven't really seen any other. It is on both banks of the Willow Run, but that's not much more than a crick, and hardly more

than a trickle in summer. From about anywhere in the town you can pretty much see the rest of it, and from the W-D parking lot I can see the top of the junior high across the Run. It is a big old brick building that was put up in the forties as the school for everything from kiddy-garden to high school. I haven't been in there for sixteen years, but all of a sudden I start thinking about the library that is next door to it. I think I still have a library card, and sure enough I find it in a back fold of my wallet with the lucky two-dollar bill Aunt Emma gave me when I was five. The card is old and yellow, but I can still make out my name, Jimmy Braithwaite, written in faded blue ink. My teachers always said I had nice hand writing, that was the one thing I could do all right.

I start the truck up and drive it across the Main street bridge to the junior high school side of town. The library is right there where I remember in the school's shadow - just a little grey bump of a building. I pull in front but the hand-lettered sign in the window says that the library doesn't open until ten in the summer. I wait in my truck.

Just before ten, the lady I guess is the librarian now pulls into the lot in a little shiny red car. She is young and very pretty, with lots of light brown hair, and she sees me sitting in my truck and doesn't get out of her car. I know I'm a sort of a spooky looking big guy in my white coat with a Braves cap on backwards, and I guess if I was a pretty young woman I'd keep an eye on me, too.

I sit in the truck and try to think of something I can do to let her know that I don't mean no harm and all I want is to check out a book about bobcats so I can show my Dad that they don't live around here and he doesn't have to worry. A couple of days he has gone out in the woods and I guess sort of wandered around with a bottle or two, "Communing" he calls it, or "Thoreau-ing," and once when he came back he was talking about bobcat prints. There may be bad things out in the woods, I don't know, but I'm pretty sure there's no bobcats.

I can't think of anything to do that would let the librarian know that this is all I

want, and she just keeps looking out of her car at my truck with her hands still on her steering wheel. I start the truck again and drive back to the Winn Dixie.

I don't know that Dad would believe a book anyway, so I guess the whole thing was all a stupid idea in the first place, and now I feel bad for scaring the poor librarian lady for no good reason.

It is soon after I get home that my Dad leaves with the hammer, so I decide that Friday, Bobby Lee or no, I should try to talk to a Doctor.

Doctor Palumbo has three locks on his office door, all of them take different keys. He has a huge key ring he generally carries on his belt, must of us staff do, and for some reason his office keys are not separated from all the others. It takes him more than two minutes to go through all his keys until he gets the right three and opens the door.

He leads the way into his office, and the hissing starts as soon as he turns the lights on. Dr. Palumbo's office is in a first floor back corner of Willow Farm, with two big tall windows on both the outside walls, the kind that stick out from the building and have benches on the inside. The windows are all covered with heavy shutters, and as all the old furniture - the wide desk, the tall-backed chairs - and the wooden floor are all shades of brown, the office always looks dark even with the lights on. It's sort of like a big wooden cave down at the end of a hall, and the cigarettes he smokes in there make it all smell dry and abandoned. There are things living in there, though.

The hissing comes from a clear plastic case a bit taller than a shoe box. It's sitting on a bureau against a wall next to a special lamp that puts out a sort of purple-blue colored light. Some of Dr. Palumbo's degrees and things are framed on the wall behind it; all the walls are pretty much covered with certificates and papers written in old-fashioned looking letters, under glass.

"G'afternoon, ladies and laddies," Dr. Palumbo says towards the hissing box. He

has an odd way of talking - the staff says it is because he is originally from N'Orleans - and Doctors Wallace and Cester-pronounced-Chester are always sort of teasing him about it, even though he's their boss. He's everybody's boss. He tosses his clipboard on the bureau and picks the clear case right up to his face; the top is heavy black plastic with air holes and it's got a handle just like a brief case. He holds the case to eye level, just in front of his silver-rimmed granny glasses, scrunching his nose up to get the little lenses right in front of his eyes. In the case there is about an inch of wood-chips, a cardboard tube from a toilet paper roll, and four hissing cockroaches from Madagascar. Each one looks like a fat piece of grape-fruit that has gone bad and turned black, only they've got legs and waving antennas the size of knitting needles. I'm still at the office doorway, but I can see them in the case crawling on top of each other.

"And how are we today?" Dr. Palumbo says, tapping the side of the case with his finger nails. The roaches hiss louder and he chuckles before setting the case back down and going to his seat behind his desk. Right away he takes a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of his white lab coat and lights one up. He notices I'm still standing at the doorway and he motions me to a chair. I take a seat in one, even though its high back isn't really wide enough for me and I have to hunch my shoulders a bit to get into it.

"So what's on your mind, Jimbo?" he asks me, leaning forward with his elbows on the desk and looking at me over the top of his glasses, which is how he looks at the patients when he wants it to be clear he's listening seriously. It sort of makes me a little nervous, his eyes are dark black, not all that different a color than his roaches.

Before I can answer, a hiss like I never heard before comes from the roach box. "Ho! Hang on there, minute!" Dr. Palumbo holds a finger up at me and he shoots up out of his chair and scampers back over to the bureau, leaving his cigarette burning in a black glass ash tray on the desk.

"It's a fight!" he says, like maybe this was something he wanted for Christmas. He

doesn't look back at me but he holds an arm out and waves me over. I squeeze out of the chair and go stand next to him.

"The males are facing off!" he says. In the case, the two bigger roaches are head-to-head on top of the toilet paper tube, shoving against each other. Their thick little legs scratch over the cardboard as they fight. The two other roaches - the females, I guess - are on the other side of the case pretty much ignoring the whole thing.

Dr. Palumbo's eyes are huge and he's grinning almost from ear to ear. He whispers at me from the side of his mouth while we watch the roaches.

"See, the reason you get two male Madagascar cackaroaches in with two females is that a male won't let another one breed! You see this here? If these two fellows wanted, they could pair off however they desire, but these cackaroaches won't do that! No, see each of these two boys here wants both of the ladies, exclusively, for his own self!"

The male that's a little bit bigger than the other one, a good bit bigger than my thumb, and I've got big hands, has been pushing the smaller one slowly back. The smaller one's backside is hanging off the end of the toilet paper tube, and with one more shove the bigger one sends him over. Dr. Palumbo straightens up and claps.

"So what's the winner do now?" I ask. Dr. Palumbo looks at me and laughs.

"Nothing! Look at the po'boy!"

I do. The bigger roach just stays where it is on top of the tube, waving its antennas slowly around.

"Now that he's won, he's too damn tired to take advantage! And by the time he gets his breath back, the other male'll be ready, too! There's the beauty of it: Long as you got two male Madagascar cackaroaches, they won't ever let the other one breed, and you don't have to worry about eggs!"

Dr. Palumbo laughs some more and shakes his head while he walks back over to his desk. The cigarette in the ash tray is dead.

"People think human beings are the only one of all God's creatures that get afflicted by insanity," he says, sitting down and fishing out a new smoke. "But here these cackaroaches'll keep each other one miserable rather than all be happy! Fact is you can look at most anything in nature, and in some way, every once in a while, everything starts to look like it's plumb crazy!"

He smiles at me and takes a big pull from his cigarette; the paper at the end crackles like a hiss. I thank him for his time and leave before he remembers I was the one wanted to talk to him

It takes me some doing to find anybody else to talk to: Dr. Wallace is off Fridays and Cester-pronounced-Chester isn't in any of his normal places. He's not in the big green rooms upstairs where he does his group shouting meetings, not in the kitchens planning out menus with the staff, not in his basement office where the controls for the music he plays all through Willow Farm are. Thinking about that last thing makes me realize that there is still music playing, though I hadn't been noticing at all. It's funny, but even though the music is always on, you almost never notice it inside, except for maybe every hour or so when Dr. Cester changes tapes - then you hear it for a short while until it sort of fades out on you. When I think about it and stop walking though, and stand real still and hardly breathing in an empty hall, I can hear it again. There are speakers everywhere, but you don't see them. Right now it is instrumental music from a movie I never saw called Chariots Of Fire. Dr. Cester has a lot of tapes, but by now we know them all by heart.

The music is near the middle of the tape so Dr. Cester won't be back at his office to change it for a good half hour. I think about waiting at his door but after the business with Dr. Palumbo and his roaches I get a little squirmy standing in the dark basement hall. I wander around some more and find John Hernandez watching TV in the lounge with some patients. John is pretty involved in some talk show; when I come up to him he just grins at

me, points at the screen and says, "Lesbians!" but he tells me he thought he saw Dr. Cester in the East Wing.

Only part of the second floor is open in the East Wing. It is where some of the patients live in separate wards, with their own rooms, instead of all together in the west dorms. That means the patients there are either come from people with a bit of money, or are dangerous, or both. That's where I find Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester.

Dr. Cester is the newest Doctor at Willow Farm. He has been here for three years now, since Dr. Mottet got removed after a catatonic patient in his care got pregnant. Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester is sort of different than the other Doctors (they say it is on account of he's from California) and he made some changes when he got here, like the music for one, and the colored walls for another. Dr. Cester got Dr. Palumbo to agree to have the walls in the patient areas all painted different colors with names like "azure," and "amber," and "kelly," though to me they look like blue, and orange, and so forth. Before that all the inside walls were just white-washed, so I guess it looks nicer now.

I find Dr. Cester in the hall outside the Psychopath ward, staring at one of his walls, a sort of fleshy-pink colored one. There is a black footprint on the wall at eye level, and Dr. Cester is studying it real close with one of his bushy blond eyebrows raised, humming to himself, and rocking on his heels. I come up next to him but he doesn't seem to notice, so I clear my throat. He jerks and turns towards me.

"Oh, Jim!" he says, "You startled me! You sure do move quietly for a guy your size!"

"Sorry, Dr. *Chester*," I say. He takes a hand out of his lab coat pocket and waves it. "Not a problem, I suppose I was fairly engrossed. Take a look at this, would you?"

He points at the footprint. It looks like the black scuff of a sneaker sole, all wavy lines and treads. It is a good six feet off the ground.

"I noticed it out of the corner of my eye," Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester says,

"and I'm thinking, 'How did that get up there?' I mean, that is one serious Van Damme jump off the floor!"

I would have figured somebody probably took off their shoe and pressed it up there with a hand, but I don't say anything. The Doctors generally aren't interested in the staff's ideas on things like this.

"So I'm staring at this print, wondering if the guy had a ladder, and after I'm looking at it for a while, I start to make out this face, right here..."

Dr. Cester brings a hand up to parts of the footprint. "See? Right here you've got two eyes, and a Roman-looking nose, a good square jaw, you see the beard? You see that?"

I see lines. Wavy black scuffs on the pink wall.

"I suppose it could be," I say.

Dr. Cester-pronounced-Chester nods. The faint music reminds me that it was on by stopping with a click, but Dr. Cester doesn't seem to notice. I figure he is pretty busy, so I just go on down the hall past him and the bolted door to the Psychopath ward, then back down the yellow stair well at the end of the hall.

I work a double on the Saturday after Dad first showed. He still hasn't come back since the hammer thing on Thursday, and I'm not sure any more if I should still talk with somebody about him. He told me that thing about calling Ishmael if he didn't come back, but I don't know who that is. I just leave his stuff in the bedroom alone and keep sleeping out on the couch.

Even if I was still going to talk to Dr. Wallace or one of the others about my Dad, Saturday wouldn't have worked. It was one of those bad days we get once in a while at Willow Farm.

After supper I'm out in back again with John Hernandez and nine patients. The

music today is the Glen Miller Orchestra, good toe-tapping music. John and I help Bobby Lee down to the lawn in his chair, then John starts doing some more golf stuff with his flashlight and I lean against a tree by Bobby Lee. He isn't real talkative today on account of Dr. Palumbo has him on a new series of medication, so he's not all-there. Once in a while I have to wipe some drool off his chin before it gets in his beard, and he doesn't even move when I do it.

John swings his flashlight in a deep arc and makes a popping noise with his cheek and tongue. "Hoo-wee!" he yells, "I got me all of that one, sure enough!"

Walter is one of the patients out there with us. He is a nice enough young man on his good days, but the sad thing is, he doesn't have very many of those. He is what we used to call a manic, but is now called a Bipolar, which always sounded like some kind of bear to me. He has been having some episodes this week, though he seemed okay today, and he sits on a bench the other side of John with his head lopsided because of the bright red crash helmet buckled to it. Walter has been known to do some head banging. When John gets all of that one hit, Walter starts to twitch, and finally he shoots up off the bench and goes tearing down the hill in the direction that the golf ball would have gone, if there had been a golf ball. He is screaming, "I got it! I got it! I got it!" at the top of his lungs.

Me and John just sort of blink after Walter for a second as he leaves the mowed area of lawn and makes for the woods, his bruised knees and elbows pumping along as the bath robe he's wearing flaps around. Me and John look at each other, then both jump: John takes off down the hill shouting, "Hit the switch!" and I pound up the stairs and smack the staff call button on the veranda. The patients on the lawn mostly just sit there looking curious, except for one forty-year-old Diso Schizo who starts to cry for her mommy, and Bobby Lee.

Bobby Lee seems to shake out of his fog a bit and he looks after Walter's red helmet as it disappears between the trees in the woods. He pushes himself up on his arm

rests and hollers, "Ride, Stuart! Ride!" flecking spit from his mouth. When he yells that the other patients all start whooping and Bobby Lee starts shaking harder and then pitches forward out of his chair. The quilts fall away from his lap and the stumps of his knees rub over the grass as he tries to crawl towards the lip of the hill.

It takes us hours to get everything settled down. I stop Bobby before he hurts himself but he still puts up a struggle until Dr. Wallace comes charging out of the facility and tranqs him. I notice Dr. Wallace is wearing white sneaker shoes and I wonder for a second about Dr. Cester's wall. Before the rest of the staff that suddenly appear have organized a search party (we have some rules for this sort of thing, though it hasn't come up much), John comes back out of the woods without either Walter or his big flashlight. What he does have is an ugly set of bleeding bite marks in his shoulder. Dr. Palumbo is there by then and he gets the search started, sending teams of staff out into the woods. The whole patient population is riled up from the alarm, though, and all the Doctors, even Dr. Cester who is called in from home, spend the next couple of hours roaming the colored halls with the pockets of their lab coats bulging with vials, and syringes in their hands, tranquilizing everything that moves or makes noise. After that Dr. Palumbo is fit to be tied himself and he sends everybody out to stumble through the woods all night. Even so, we don't see Walter at all until he comes back of his own accord.

Thursday was the last time I ever saw my Dad. When I get home with the groceries after not going to the library my Dad isn't at the trailer, though his car is still parked in front. The night before when I had gone in for the late shift Dad was gone too, but so was his car. Now the car is back, but Dad isn't. I don't know what that means, and even though I'd been up all night and I have another shift Friday morning, I can't get to sleep for thinking about it. I lie on my little half-couch, which is where I've been sleeping since Dad got here even though my legs hang off one end and I have to sort of wedge my

head up on a pillow against the wall at the other end. It's light out, another sunny day, and all I've got on the windows are my duck-curtains, so inside the trailer it is all kind of blue, with white and yellow spaces of light where the sun shines through the ducks. When the wind pulls at the curtains it looks sort of like those duck-shapes are swimming around on the walls. I've got better curtains that keep out the light altogether, but they are back in the bedroom.

I think maybe I should go out and look for my Dad but I don't have any real idea where he could be. I know at night he has been going to the bars in Tuxedo, on account of the match books I keep finding on the floor or once in a while in the garbage. Thing is; I don't think that those places are open this early in the day. Though on some days Dad has gone out "Thoreau-ing" in the woods back of the park, I'm not real clear on what that is and don't know if he'd want to be interrupted doing it, even if I could find him. There is miles and miles of woods back there, they stretch all the way to Willow Farm.

Still, I'm almost decided to get up and at least look around the park some for him, maybe ask if anybody saw him around, but before I've made up my mind for sure, Dad comes back. This is at about four in the afternoon.

There's a ruckus from the front door and after a struggle Dad shoves it open and almost falls inside. His pants, beige slacks again, are covered with mud and grass stains, and his shirt is only half buttoned and not tucked in. His face is beet red, like he's been out in the sun all day. He comes into the trailer, dark compared to the outside, and blinks around until he sees me on the couch. He sways in the open doorway with the smell of honeysuckle drifting in around him.

"James, old fruit of my loins!" he says to me, almost in a bark. His voice is way too loud for inside and his words run together. "Where've you been all my life?"

I'm not sure what he means by that - I've been here but I don't know about him - but he doesn't wait for me to answer anyway.

"Have we got a hammer about?" he asks.

I'm sitting up on the couch by this point. I look at Dad real careful. I don't know him real well - like I've said - but for some reason he just doesn't seem like a guy that would have much use for a tool. He's got real soft-looking pale white hands - except for the two fingers always stained with cigarette smoke - and I just can't picture him holding a hammer.

"Well?" he asks. He's swaying so much he's almost pitching over. I nod at him.

"There's some tools under the sink," I say, "In the red box with the..."

Dad nods and walks to the kitchen: More like he just leans in that direction and his feet sort of scuff across the floor to keep him upright. I get up and follow him. He hits his knees hard in front of the counter and yanks open the door under the sink, pulling my tool box out of the back and knocking a bottle of Liquid Plumber and a can of Raid to the kitchen floor. He opens the box, and starts scooping out pliers and screwdrivers till he gets to the hammer under everything else at the bottom. He grabs that and gets himself to his feet with a hand on the counter, pulling the hammer loose, which flips the box and spills nails all over the floor with the other tools. He holds the hammer above his head and looks at me with a huge grin that's a bit spooky.

"Coronate me, boy!" he screams, "I'm the fucking King of England!" Then he starts cackling in a way that usually gets people strapped to a table at the Farm, and he stumbles back for the door.

"Dad?" I say, but he passes by me. He bumps against the couch and almost goes down, but his feet are still moving faster than the rest of him and they keep him upright. It's like he's a pole somebody is balancing: Like the balancer is scampering around whichever direction the pole leans and saving it from crashing to the ground every time. I'm almost sure he's not going to make the two stairs down to the sidewalk and I hurry behind him, but he stays upright all the way to the side of his car. Once there, he leans over

heavy against the driver's door.

"Dad?" I ask again, from the porch. He is singing now.

"I'd hammer out justice, I'd hammer out freeeeeeeee-dom!!!"

My Dad swings the hammer sideways into his driver-side window. The glass shatters loud across the front seat and the hot, quiet afternoon.

Now I really don't know what to make of that. I'm still standing on the porch and maybe half thinking that I'm still asleep on the couch with the little duck shapes shining on me. My Dad tosses the hammer into the car, then reaches in through the broken window and fumbles around on the steering column. He pulls his arm back out, and he's holding the keys.

"Locked myself out," he says to me, like it's just a matter-of-fact thing. He unlocks the car door with the key even though he could just reach inside again. He opens the door and starts brushing glass out off the driver seat with his bare hand. I just stare.

After a good amount of glass tinkles out onto the gravel, Dad swings into the car and flops into his seat. He slams the door behind him and the last bit of glass falls out of the broken window. He starts the car and looks out the windshield at me with a big grin. He salutes, and when he does, a big fat spot of blood splats on the left lens of his glasses.

"If I'm not back by tomorrow," he shouts over the engine, "call me Ishmael!" He snaps the salute forward and more blood flecks on the inside of the windshield. Then he puts the car in reverse and whips hard back into the lot, pointing the car at the exit. Before he squeals out and away, I see the windshield wipers come on, and I wonder if my Dad thinks that they will wipe away the blood. His blood. Mine.

I could have told him they won't ever do that, but I didn't know how.

Dad never does show again.

Two days after he makes his break, Walter comes back to Willow Farm.

I wasn't on shift the morning Walter came back, but I got the whole story a number of times from the staff that was. Nobody had talked about anything but Walter for the two days he was gone, though of course they only talked about it to each other because Dr. Palumbo would have fired anybody saying anything to anybody else, even though he himself was almost to the point of calling the police. Dr. Palumbo did fire John Hernandez, though, and he might have fired me too, if he'd thought about it.

But he didn't, so I was there to hear the story of Walter's return over and over again. There really wasn't much to it: All he did was come in through the front door all dirty - robe all ripped, red crash helmet still on - and tell the nurse at the desk that he was hungry. Scared the hell out of a couple people who were waiting for visiting hours in the lobby though. By the time I saw him again Walter was cleaned up and sedated pretty heavy, but he must have been a sight that morning; I heard from the nurse herself that he talked to that she thought Walter was going to kill her - he looked that wild.

He probably could have killed her, if he'd been of a mind to. He had lost John's flashlight somewhere while he was out there - wherever he was - but somewhere he had got something to replace it. A hammer. A regular one, like you'd find in any toolbox under a sink. Nobody knew where he'd got it, but nobody seemed real bothered either. I don't know that anybody even asked him. Maybe I should have said something, but I don't know what.

I waited another week, then I went back to sleeping in the bedroom of my trailer. I put Dad's clothes that were lying around back in his bag with the bottles, and put the whole works in a closet, where it still is now, though I don't think anymore that my Dad is coming back again.

Could be he just drove back north, back to Connecticut. Maybe he pitched that hammer out a window along the highway that runs out past the Farm. Or maybe he turned off, took one of the old rutty dirt roads that criss-cross the woods that side of town. Old

carriage paths, I think my Aunt Emma told me once - unused roads that nobody remembers, that went somewhere forgotten. A car could get stuck out there, and who knows what somebody would run into trying to "Thoreau" their way back to the highway in the dark. Bobcats? Something worse?

You're lost, and you see a flashlight shining in the woods. It must be somebody looking for you, isn't that what you'd think? Your son, come to find you, like you said you came to find him.

I can't know any of that, of course, but sometimes at night it is what my thoughts will run to, when I'm almost asleep and I hear a squirrel's little nails scrabbling over the roof of the trailer. I think maybe I should run myself out into those shady woods, out into the swallowing green mouth of rustling breezes and trickling waters and things you can't see moving under the leaves on the ground. But how could anyone find anything out there? Or maybe that's the point. Maybe you only run into those woods when you're past wanting to be found. And that is not me.

But now, I don't think that anybody is looking for me. Not anymore.